



**Enhancing the Understanding
of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF):
Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization
and Reintegration of Returnees in
the Republic of North Macedonia**

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ASSOCIATION OF CITIZENS - NEXUS CIVIL CONCEPT
Skopje, North Macedonia

Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF):
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Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This analysis is a result of a one year research undertaken within the project “Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF): Challenges for Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration of Returnees in the Republic of North Macedonia”, implemented by the civil societies NEXUS Civil Concept as the lead organisation, and the Institute for Human Rights as co-organisation. The project was supported by the Hedayah Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism, through the STRIVE Global Program funded by the European Union. The project activities were implemented in the period between June, 2019 and June, 2020.

The project team consisted of many constituencies, such as researchers and coordinators from three civil society organizations among them two national and one international. All the involved actors contributed to the proficiency of the work which resulted in this analysis.

We thank the reviewers for their help in improving the final text and we appreciate their efforts.

We are grateful to all national institutions and policymakers for their willingness and openness for cooperation despite the challenges they are facing, the religious communities, and representatives from the private sector for a given time and valuable insights.

The analysis should be a step towards improvement. It understandably systematizes the findings for any interested reader but at the same time offers focused policy recommendations.

As a team, we do believe that it will reach its goal.

Afrodita Musliu
Coordinator of the research project



TABEL OF CONTENTS

- Foreword and Acknowledgements..... 3**
- List of Acronyms and Abbreviations..... 6**
- Executive Summary..... 7**
- Introduction..... 12**
- Methodological approach 16**
- Literature review..... 19**
 - The phenomena of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) 19
 - Prevention and rehabilitation process..... 20
 - Regional context 21
 - Macedonian context 22
 - Family members 22
 - Prisons 23
 - Local authorities 23
 - Religious communities 23
 - Private sector 24
- Legal framework..... 25**
 - International legal framework..... 25
 - National legal framework..... 27
- Factors and reasons which lead towards radicalization and joining FTF groups 31**
 - Demographics..... 31
 - Education and Social performance..... 32
 - Socio-economic factors..... 33
 - Religion..... 34
 - Criminal history..... 36
- Motivations for disengagement and de-radicalization 36**
- Challenges to the rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration (RRR) process in North Macedonia 40**
 - From the perspective of the convicted individuals - returnees and facilitators 40
 - From the Family Perspective 42
 - From the perspective of the Islamic religious community - IRC..... 43
 - From the perspective of the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions 44
 - From the perspective of prison officials and expert service in prisons who are in direct contact with foreign fighters - returnees and facilitators..... 46
 - From the perspective of the social protection system institutions (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and inter-municipal social work centres)..... 49
 - From the perspective of the municipalities..... 51
 - From the perspective of the business sector..... 52

Conclusion and Recommendations.....53
Bibliography57
Excerpts from the Analysis Reviews60

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CC	Criminal Code
CoE	Council of Europe
DIS	Directorate for Execution of the Sanctions
EU	European Union
GCTF	Global Counterterrorism Forum
IRC	Islamic Religious Community
FTF	Foreign terrorist fighters
LES	Law on Execution of Sanctions
MLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
NCCVECT	National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Counter Terrorism
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RAN	Radicalisation Awareness Network
RRR	Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration
UN	United Nations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) is not new on a global scale. It is the subject of analyses and attempts towards legal regulation, on-going activities aimed for its prevention, and measures aiming to mitigate the consequences resulting from persons involved in the extremist activities. Persons who returned from the battlefields, as well as persons that are recruiting fighters, are subject to significant sanctions. But to terminate or prevent such future occurrences and recidivism, serious steps need to be taken. First, steps that will lead to their deradicalization, and latter another set of steps for their rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration in the social environments.

This analysis seeks to answer the questions related to this phenomenon that directly affect Macedonian society, while providing an additional overview of the measures taken at the regional and the international level. The analysis bridges the barriers and draws attention of the general public to the potential danger of ignoring this phenomenon. It also raises awareness about the challenges that society would be faced with in order to overcome them. To answer these questions, the problem of FTF returnees and facilitators¹ was analysed through the prism of various social factors, including institutional and non-institutional actors and through direct contact with the FTF and facilitators - currently sentenced to imprisonment in the penitentiaries in North Macedonia.

For the purpose of the analysis, interviews with representatives of 9 different target groups were conducted in accordance with specially developed interview guides and sets of questions that were customized for each target group separately. A total of 59 interviews were conducted among which 10 were conducted with FTF-returnees and facilitators, 6 interviews were conducted with family members suggested by the FTFs imprisoned when asked to recommend one relative to talk with. An additional 4 FTF-returnees and facilitators refused to participate in the interviews. Further, one interview with a family member failed to be realized, because the interviewee didn't want to talk about his relative who have suggested we interview that person in first place.

The main idea was to create an approach that will detect the motives that led to radicalization. This analysis is based on a structured research method and it tries to tackle and present potential factors. Naturally, this does not exclude the possibility for different interpretations within different approaches and expertise. In addition to the factors and motives for radicalization, it also presents the potential factors for the return of the FTF and facilitators. Namely, these include what specifically made them leave the extremist practices, whether it was due to the accidental circumstances or there are possible overriding points of deradicalization.

¹ The term "facilitators" in this analysis is used for the persons who are convicted for recruiting, assisting, financing or preparing a person or a group for participation in a foreign army, police, and paramilitary or parapolice formations.

Therefore, based on the fieldwork and our analysis, we have detected several common characteristics among FTF returnees and facilitators. We do believe, however, that an individual approach to each of the convicts is the key to success in their rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration programs (RRR) and the programs should be applied in that manner. We have observed that the radicalization and departures of the interviewed FTF - returnees and facilitators were caused by an interrelated and conditioned set of reasons and factors that influenced the behaviour and activities of these individuals. The analysis of the reasons and factors which lead to radicalization indicates that some of the individuals pose a social character that practically pushes individuals towards radicalization and contributes to the acceptance of such ideas and attitudes. These causes and factors, also known as push factors, in the specific sample of the interviewed FTF-returnees and facilitators, are manifested in the form of **structural issues including:**

- **Poverty** (*namely, the individuals originate from modest / income families and nearly all have received, or are still receiving welfare*); and,
- **Low education attainment** (*only one individual has graduated from higher education, while all others have only attained primary or secondary education*).

Meanwhile, **at individual level**, some of the individuals have witnessed **tragic events**, which they had associated them with injustice and discrimination (*violent demonstrations with casualties in their communities*). Others have experienced **personal crisis and tragedy** (*parental death or dramatic change of the environment in which they lived*). It can be indirectly concluded that the interviewees to all intents and purposes, had **limited opportunities** for personal and socio-economic development, which is another factor for the vulnerability of this group of individuals.

The other set of the reasons and factors that additionally attracted the interviewed FTF - returnees and facilitators to radical ideology and attitudes (so-called pull factors), can be identified as:

- **Empathy and a sense of belonging to a particular group** (*FTF returnees and facilitators had accepted the narrative of oppression against Muslims around the world and had identified themselves with the members of the Islamic State*);
- **Strong fraternal ties** (*most of the individuals had indicated that they departed “to help their Muslim brothers”*); and,
- **A romanticized view of the ideology**, namely that interviewees showed a strong desire to defend Islam “which was under threat” (*individuals considered it a “duty to help Muslims” and that “the persecution of Muslims should be stopped”*).

Another factor that attracted the interviewees was **video content with radical themes and violence** which they were found online on social media (*almost all individuals prior to departing for Syria confirmed that they had watched such videos*). Whilst all individuals categorically denied that their departure was prompted by **promises of employment, money or another material benefit**, cross-checking the data, there was a strong possibility that these motives might have existed as well (*all individuals who were in Syria stated they*

lived well there, had everything they needed, had their own house/accommodation, while having previously stated that they left Macedonia with little money). However, all the individuals do not explicitly indicate that material motives influenced their decision to depart for Syria or to assist other people to join.

To address the abovementioned challenges and apply meaningful deradicalization and RRR processes, a multidisciplinary approach is not only necessary, but crucial due to the complexity of the cases. The analysis indicates a lack of initiative, devotion and institutional interest in addressing the problems. This points to:

1. An insufficiently coordinated approach by the state institutions;
2. The unpreparedness of the relevant actors to deal with the problem; and,
3. Low awareness at the local administrative level where these persons are likely to return after serving prison sentences.

All these barriers come despite seemingly open support in the expected process of change by the wider social community and certainly by their closest families.

Since this RRR process in North Macedonia is slow and the results are not visible, we estimate that without institutional support, the chances for deradicalization of the convicted FTF and facilitators are slim and the undertaken steps are inadequate. Developing and establishing **rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration programs (RRR programs)** is a process that is not simple at all. It needs to be well systematized (from a methodological, institutional and programmatic point of view) and sustainable (in financial and personnel terms). It should be flexible and inclusive and have clearly set and measurable indicators of success. The need for comprehensiveness of the RRR programs is predetermined by the fact that each individual reacts differently to the activities and measures that are part of these programs due to their physical, psychological, intellectual and other socio-cultural features and beliefs. The complexity of these programs is aggravated by the fact that FTF returnees and facilitators are part of the prison population with certain specifics (*indoctrination with radical ideas and ideologies that have the potential to manifest and escalate into violent extremism and terrorism*), making them a particularly high-risk prison population as well as a possible security risk against society as a whole.

Modern RRR programs, in addition to the **transparent and inclusive** process of their conception, include **multidimensionality** in their practical implementation. They focus not only on the period of serving the prison sentence, but on probation activities and the period after serving sentences when the individuals are returned to their communities. This should seek to address that **municipal authorities do not feel directly concerned in providing such assistance**. They believe that this is the task of the Ministry of Interior and the Social Work Centres and that the municipality does not have the authority to take the first steps and be the main bearer. That is, on the whole, municipal authorities consider themselves only as an additional, accompanying segment, and they see the directions of the broad coordination as the responsibility of the institutions from the national level. However, it has been shown that the position of the municipal authorities regarding

their own capacities has not been determined, even if there are specific programs for the resocialization of FTF and the facilitators.

Another key concern is that **the penitentiaries have poor resocialization capacity**. They do not have enough programs that provide technical or vocational education and training (TVET) (*for example none of the seven interviewees in the Idrizovo Penitentiary have participated in any kind of a program that the prison organizes for the acquisition of certain vocational skills and knowledge*). Only one of the two individuals in Shtip penitentiary participated and received appropriate certificates for acquiring vocational skills and knowledge (welding course and cooking course), and the individual in the Kumanovo penitentiary attended a course in the prison bakery.

Additionally, **the penitentiaries lack capacity and staff**. Most of them are understaffed and sufficient capacity is necessary to establish an adequate process of RRR. The specific challenge is **to establish mutual trust**, and to do so, as shown by previous experience from practice, it is crucial **to equip the institutions** (especially - the departments of re-socialization, prison police, and prison staff, where there is no staff), and additionally to **train the staff** for the implementation of the RRR Program. The assistance is needed to establish **cooperation with other institutions**. In that regard, the help of civil society organizations is necessary. Regional experiences should also be used in addition.

Despite insufficient coordination, lack of initiative, and avoidance of the responsibilities in taking first steps, the institutions of the social protection system are fully aware that **FTF - returnees and facilitators need to get involved in social life to avoid recidivism**. Therefore, many of the respondents find it crucial to determine the reason for their return to the country. They find that it is necessary to **include clinical psychologists and psychiatrists** in FTF – returnees and facilitators RRR process and to make an assessment of their mental state. They consider that it is especially important not to leave these people on the margins of society, not to stigmatize or socially exclude them. In addition, they find it necessary to provide them with material livelihood, work, and if necessary, housing considering that is the way for minimizing the danger of repeating the crime and spreading the ideology of violence.

No private companies have been involved in local and state preventive practices and initiatives. Only two interviewed in this study have already hired an individual who has previously been convicted on other grounds. In both cases, the individuals have been working for the companies for several years and according to the managers, are loyal and hardworking workers. When asked if the companies would offer jobs to individuals who have already been rehabilitated and qualified for profiles that they need, almost everyone answered affirmatively. The same number answered that they would be involved in **aiding RRR programs** for these individuals at the local level, which is in the spirit of «socially responsible companies.»

In general, it is evident from the collected data that in Macedonian institutional system (involving penitentiary and social care institutions), and especially its segment referring to the action for resocialization of FTF - returnees and facilitators is in a worrying stage. Not only does it not provide the desired results today, but may contribute to further radicalization of these individuals, expanding their radicalization among the rest of the prison population, as well as endangering overall national security because of the high risk of recidivism.

The need of urgency for vigorous action and developing RRR programs for FTF returnees and facilitators in the penitentiary institutions in our country is also determined by the fact that until 2024 all of the convicted persons for this kind of felony will serve their prison sentences.

In this regard we point to the most key recommendation for overcoming of the aforementioned challenges. Some of them suggest that:

- ✓ Systematic, sustainable, measurable and inclusive de-radicalization programs need to be developed as soon as possible which will provide appropriate counter-narratives for direct deconstruction, discrediting and demystification of violent radical and extremist messages
- ✓ Introduction of an individual and flexible approach to resocialization programs for all FTF returnees in prisons as well as provision of more courses to acquire skills and education, which are of interest to the prisoners, therefore, increasing their opportunities and competitiveness at the labour market;
- ✓ Development of sustainable and measurable programmes and actions plans for early detection of radicalisation among youth and other population

Detailed recommendations for the Directorate for Execution of the sanctions, social protection system institutions, Religious communities, municipalities and the business sector in order to improve the overall current situation of the FTFs returnees and facilitators in the country are to be found on 54.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) are individuals who leave home to fight in foreign wars, usually employed by fairly well-known terrorist groups or VEOs (Violent Extremist Organizations). These individuals originate from 90 different countries, even from countries that had no prior history in employing their own citizens in foreign war zones. According to relevant researches, at the start of 2016, the number of individuals who have travelled to Iraq and Syria to take part in the conflict, on the side of rebel or terrorist groups as “foreign fighters” reached over 42,000 individuals, and almost one third originate from member-states of the European Union (out of which 155 from our country). This departure reached its peak between 2011 and 2016, and from 2015 this number is declining because of their return (5,000 of them returned to Europe, out of which 110 to our country) as well because the collapse of the ISIS governance structures and territorial hold. There is an international concern for the probability of their renewed employment in violent activities, including terrorism. The reasons for their return differ. Some FTF may be disappointed; others may have run away. Others may have been caught and returned against their will. Some of them may intend to continue the battles on European soil. Undoubtedly, returnees come from different nationalities, ethnicities, ages and genders. Expectedly, they all suffer from different levels of trauma and emotional/psychological problems (Hedayah 2016; RAN 2016; RAN 2017). Currently, there are 13 convicted individuals serving a prison sentence in the Republic of North Macedonia. Only 3 of them are not FTFs returnees, meaning they were not at the frontline in Syria and Iraq, but were convicted for recruiting, financing and enabling the departure of the volunteer fighters. Additionally, one other person is in detention prison.

Aiming to prevent violent extremism and international terrorism, fighting terrorism in the last couple of decades has made inroads and often dominated security discussions. Among initiatives, governments recognized the need to address “basic reasons” or “initiators” of radicalization in order to design programs and politics by which they can help eliminate or reduce the initial factors. These reasons can differ, from ideological to family ties influence of charismatic leaders, limited economic opportunities, political situations, material gain, revenge or many other situations that contribute to radicalization (Zeiger 2016). It is of great importance to determine the cause to prevent it. Besides the causes, part of the big picture are the returnees, keeping in mind that individuals that come back, lived through traumatic events, and it is highly likely that their opinions are more extreme. Therefore, there is a need to assist them to free themselves from the violent activities and to reintegrate them into their society after their return (Hedayah 2016).

There are international initiatives in the given field such as the Rome Memorandum for Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders adopted in the framework of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). Its aim is

to decrease the probability for these people to revert to terrorism in this process of de-radicalization, reintegration and resocialization. Alongside, the governments should involve a broad spectrum of different organizations which will input specific aspects in the course of planning and implementation. This “softer” side of the struggle against terrorism should lean on a variety of social actors, including teachers, social workers, leaders of the community of different age and gender, who should be working with the traditional actors of national security, that being the policy makers, high government officials, police and intelligence officers (Zeiger 2016). This symbiosis seeks coordinated actions in which reintegration is seen as a process in which former fighters gain civilian status and obtain access to different forms of civilian work, and thus an income. That essentially is a social and economic process, a part of the basic development of the country and part of the social responsibility (Gleichmann et al. 2004).

In the EU, several programs for reintegration of the violent extremists exist. Amid the more successful ones are the those conducted in north-west Europe, for example the Violence Prevention Network, Hayat, and EXIT Deutschland programs² implemented in Germany; Slotervaart in Netherlands; the Aarhus model in Denmark, and Fryshuset in Sweden. The Danish Aarhus approach, as well as the reintegration initiative in the Netherlands conducted by the Dutch probation service, is other such examples. In all these examples, a large number of organizations are tasked with a smoother implementation of the rehabilitation and reintegration process of violent extremists, and each one of them has its own specific approach to de-radicalization or dismissal (RAN 2016). Contrary to this local approach, the regional multi-agency approaches are important as well like those incorporating structured intervention and coordination between different agencies, based on leading principles for effective tackling of the cases (RAN 2017:33). In any case, effective programmes for the rehabilitation and reintegration of returned foreign fighters are vital not only to prevent future acts of violence, but to moderate further radicalization (especially amid the younger population) as well as building strong community resilience to violent extremism (Holmer & Shtuni 2017).

To make the previously described programs workable and implementable, apart from a tailor-made approach, the whole method needs to embody the principles of good governance (RAN 2017:27). It has to be undertaken in accordance with democratic principles, including participation of this vulnerable group in the social processes. That involves their informed and organized participation in the political, public and social life, establishing preconditions that guarantee civil and political rights and freedoms of association and expression. It is elementary that the reintegration and resocialization are conducted in a society that respects the rule of law, meaning that there is even-handed legal framework and unbiased implementation of the law, human and minority rights are respected by the police, security forces and an independent judiciary. These principles are especially important because they grant the basis for equality and inclusivity, they are

² The European “exit programs” are mostly voluntary ones using psychosocial modalities and rely on personal interventions. Potentially useful in designing initiatives for de-radicalization in different contexts, their support relies on long-term and sustainable investments and specialized expertise.

meant to secure the sense of belonging in all members of society, their inclusion in the management processes, thus providing chances for a change of life-style (Gleichmann et al. 2004). Therefore, it is not enough for the programs for rehabilitation and resocialization to be professional, flexible and sustainable, it is also necessary for their goals to be transparent, and the involved factors in the process are credible (Holmer & Shtuni 2017).

Alongside, the path away from violent extremism is a complex process rooted in ideas of identity, psychosocial dynamics, and practical considerations. Disengagement is not sufficient, since it need to be followed from a de-radicalization because the disengagement usually precedes de-radicalization but does not ensure it. Radicalization is a complex psychosocial process that is driven by a combination of individual traits and circumstances, social dynamics, and external enabling conditions. In that sense, disengagement and de-radicalization require sustained and concerted effort in order to address the recidivism, to acquire a new positive identity, not only to prevent the return to violence, but as well not to radicalize others. In this process, the society as whole and in particular, specific social groups play a great role, having in mind those concerns are necessary for successful approach towards the violent extremism (Holmer & Shtuni 2017).

No one single model of rehabilitation and reintegration can be implemented in all cultural contexts. The ideas for social and family obligations, honour, shame, forgiveness and reconciliation are undoubtedly culturally defined. The way these communities communicate and their structures differ, as well as the role and influence of the family, the leaders of the communities, and institutions (Holmer & Shtuni 2017). Therefore, the programs need to be adapted to local context, cultural and legal traditions, but fall in line with the applicable international and national standards. The programs for reintegration need to be considered and implemented carefully, considering their direct influence over basic rights, including the right to freedom of thought, belief, religion and the right to a fair trial. This is the only way to surmount the feelings of distrust and build true social support (Hedayah 2016).

This research is part of the efforts addressing the reasons for radicalization and the creation of strategies for de-radicalization, rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration of FTF returnees. Moreover, the aim of the research is to identify the push and pull factors which lead towards radicalization and joining FTFs groups by studying FTF returnees in North Macedonia. The research focuses on their motivations for disengagement, and de-radicalization as well as the general challenges of in-country rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration (RRR) process. Having this category of sanctioned individuals in penitentiaries in North Macedonia, we assessed the above-mentioned challenges from the point of FTF – returnees and facilitators; their closest surrounding i.e. their families; the religious community they belong (Islamic Religious Community), and the country's ability to undertake and administer adequate activities for de-radicalization, rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration processes for this category of convicts. The goal is to provide a basis for argumentative social debate for the existing courses, as well as the solutions based on relevant experiences and practices. We believe that the

research provides solid ground for the future development or improvement of the existing programs, securing the comprehensiveness of the approach, and establishing the potential for consistency in their upcoming implementation. Alongside, without underestimating the key elements necessary for the successfully overcoming of the challenges and realization of the programs (such as adequate planning and ensuring sufficient financing), this research points to more structured social activities, raises the general awareness and increases the community responsibility and ability for acceptance.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research was based on qualitative in-depth interviews with the aim to explore and understand the stated thought of individuals or a group subjected to a social problem. It was considered as an acceptable approach in studying phenomenon when there are insufficient or inadequate resources related to it (Creswell 2013). We used the qualitative research methods because of their flexibility and their potential to gain a better understanding of the FTF phenomenon in North Macedonia.

Interviews were conducted with representatives of 9 different target groups in accordance with specially developed interview guides and sets of questions that were customized for each target group separately. A total of 59 interviews were conducted. An additional 4 FTF-returnees and facilitators refused to participate in the interviews and one interview with a family member failed to be realized.

Table 1. Target groups for conducted interviews

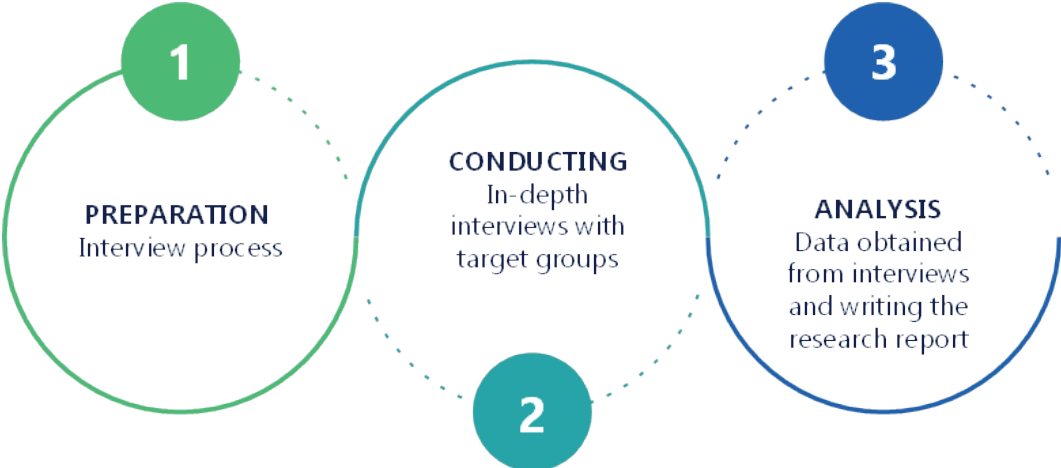
Target groups	Interviewed persons	Rejected to be interviewed
FTF returnees and facilitators	10	4
Family members of the FTF - returnees and facilitators	6	1
Islamic Religious Community (IRC) representatives	6	-
Directorate for Execution of Sanctions	3	-
Policy makers' representatives	3	-
Prison officers and professional service in the prisons who are in direct contact with FTF - returnees and facilitators	8	-
Institutions of the system for social protection (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and inter-municipal centres for social work)	6	-
Municipal officials (social and educational officers/workers)	4	-
Business sector	11	-
Total	59	5

The interviews were based on **life story research method** as a qualitative method for gathering data, where the respondents were required to document their life in a certain time period and place, social relations with other variables in the time of crucial life decisions.

The interview analysis focused mainly on the descriptive and phenomenon aspects and required the respondents to speak about the events from different periods in their life that were the subject of interest of the research, conducting the method of “narrative analysis.” This analytical approach of the stated stories with a so-called “narrative analysis” enables

the researchers to give a rich explanation of the experiences stated by the respondents, research the meanings arising from their experiences, and finally present them. Using the **life story** approach, the researchers saw different motions and turning points present in the lives of these individuals. For proper utilisation of the qualitative method the following research process was conducted:

Figure 1: The Research Life Cycle



One of the difficulties regarding the implementation of the research activities was the appointment of the interviews with this specific prison population. Another issue was a past recall that arises since the people’s memories are seldom accurate.

Meanwhile, in terms of interviewing tools, the Observing Rapport-Based Interpersonal Techniques (ORBIT) was utilized. These techniques were proven as effective in generating useful information from respondents. In that sense, while adapting to the interviewee responses, the interview was focused on key topics and items relevant to the case by simply creating an atmosphere that was conducive to open communication (Alison et al. 2013). The ORBIT interviewing techniques were also considered as a coding framework with three elements: the Motivational Interviewing technique which seeks the truth by using the empathic rapport-based interviewing tactics; the Interpersonal Behaviour Circle for coding interpersonal interactions between interrogator and suspect; and lastly as a measure of evidently useful information that examined, the extent to which offenders disclosed the information.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research and interview process which was conducted in a penal institution with individuals serving a prison sentence, special focus was paid to the ethical considerations with the goal to lower the risk of unforeseen damages that may originate, both for the respondents and the researchers. For the purpose of the ethical considerations, the research ethics committee was settled in order to review and assess whether the research interview guides and research protocol conforms to recognised ethical standards, which includes respecting the dignity, rights, safety and well-being of the interviewed persons.

Furthermore, in the process of conducting the interviews with FTFs prisoners and during data processing, a “Do No Harm” approach was applied. As an especially accepted approach in the matters that contain high sensitivity such as humanitarian actions, traumatic issues, peace building measures and conflict prevention, we believe that the applied “Do No Harm” approach ensured neutrality, objectivity and impartiality of the researchers during and after the interviews with this complex prison population. During the interviews and during the analyses of the obtained data, special attention was paid to:

- Avoid any possible identification of the respondents in the research report and codes for every respondent and target group was used;
- Protect the identity of the respondents from outside factors in a way that every respondent in our documents have been coded;
- Not to record the interviews and ensure only notes were taken; and,
- Conduct the interviews with the FTF-returnees and facilitators in prison only with researchers (sex and ethnicity) that have been chosen by the FTF-returnees in the informed consent.

The interviewers requested the respondents not to describe in detail their actions in Syria and Iraq.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomena of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)

The complexity of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF) phenomenon and especially the necessity of their effective rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration (RRR) process is a topic which is not very systematically researched at national level. The available literature and research data on this phenomenon do not provide deep insight of its correlations and causality with other social, cultural, economic and political developments in the Macedonian society.

The seriousness of FTF phenomenon was reaffirmed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 2170 and 2178, adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which determined that the flow of FTFs constitutes an “international threat to peace and security.” UNSC Resolution 2178 (2014) obliged the states to prevent, disrupt, prosecute, rehabilitate and reintegrate FTFs... and ...*encourages* Member States to engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to counter the violent extremist narrative that can incite terrorist acts. Furthermore, the UNSC Resolution 2396 reiterated the call in 2014 resolution, the Member States to cooperate and support each other’s efforts addressing FTFs, but also calls all States to establish serious criminal offenses in regard to the travel, recruitment, and financing of FTFs as well as to take appropriate action in regards to suspected terrorists and their accompanying family members, including appropriate prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration measures in compliance with domestic and international law (UNSC 2017).

We would like to point out that the purpose of these analyses is not primarily theoretically to define the terms “Foreign Terrorist Fighters” nor “violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT)” because simply these terms and process even in global context are problematic for defining as a result of the various scientific approaches used, but also as a result of the political connotation that is intertwined in their genesis. However, in order to frame this analysis and to be clear in which context we are using these terms, as a highly relevant we take into consideration the following definition:

“Foreign terrorist fighters are individuals who travel to a state other than their states of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning, or preparation of, or participation in, terrorist acts or the providing or receiving of terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict” (UNSC 2014).

“Violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT) is a dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action. This may eventually, but not necessarily, lead this person to advocate, act in support of, or to engage in terrorism” (OSCE 2019a:18).

Prevention and rehabilitation process

In the context of the global efforts for preventing and tackling this phenomenon, the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) has adopted the Hague-Marrakech Memorandum and various initiatives that offer to the states a number of good practices and lessons learned related to FTF rehabilitation and reintegration, countering violent extremism (CVE), criminal justice, and rule of law responses.

The European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), in November 2013, released a Declaration devoted to the good practices for engagement with foreign fighters for prevention, outreach, rehabilitation and reintegration. Regarding the disengagement and reintegration efforts, the Malta Principles for Reintegrating Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) serve to provide guidance in developing community-based solutions to the phenomenon and to develop programs designed to reintegrate these individuals and, potentially, their families. as they address more general radicalization issues in their communities. Involving families, community members and civil society organizations is in line with the "*whole-of-society approach*," envisions a role for multiple sectors and civil society actors in prevention, intervention, disengagement, and rehabilitation programmes (OSCE 2019b). The "*whole-of-society approach*" basically is more inclusive oriented from the "*whole-of-government approach*" which, in the context of the FTFs returnees and RRR processes, its core initiatives and actions are based on law enforcement, security and government actors-led efforts. It is important that more focus is put on other aspects such as "building community resilience to radicalization, promoting counter-narratives, promoting the role of youth and women as civil society leaders, [and] elevating the role of moderate religious voices" (U.S. State Department 2015).

RRR programs have the best chance of success when they are based on respect of human rights (Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families 2017). The obligation to respect human rights in countering the threats posed by FTFs has been reiterated in numerous subsequent declarations and conventions, including in the 2015 European Union (EU) Joint Riga Statement following the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris and the Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism, which focuses on FTFs ("Foreign Terrorist Fighters" (FTF) Initiative The Hague – Marrakech Memorandum on Good Practices for a More Effective Response to the FTF Phenomenon 2014). In this context, for example, OSCE participating states, when dealing the treats and challenges that FTFs, committed themselves to apply the Human Rights Framework in the process of adopting and implementing a comprehensive and holistic approach to prevention, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration and to recalibrate the balance between suppressive approaches, less coercive alternatives and preventive ones, favouring the latter when possible (OSCE 2018).

Understanding the nature of the FTF problem – the motivation of those engaged in FTF-related travel and return, and the threat it represents– is a necessary pre-requisite to formulate effective strategies of prevention and response (GCTF 2014). FTF returnees

are not a homogeneous group. In order to make reintegration programs effective, they need to be flexible and tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of the individual. All attempts to reintegrate extremists or terrorists should begin with an assessment of individual needs, activities and networks using specific methods of assessing the risk of violent extremism (RAN 2017).

Rehabilitation programming typically targets individuals radicalized to violence (including terrorist offenders) and possibly their families at different stages of radicalization. These programmes include both prison-based disengagement and post-detention aftercare programmes focusing on the rehabilitation and reintegration of terrorist offenders and returning “FTFs” and their re-entry into society. Some programmes offer educational and vocational training, counselling, employment opportunities and dialogue on relevant ideologies (OSCE 2018). Prison conditions can play a significant role in increasing or decreasing risks (Liebling, Alison & Mark S. Hamm (Ed). 2015). “Prison based rehabilitation programmes need to be complemented by non-custodial reintegration. In order to be successful, both need to be firmly embedded within broader strategies outside of the criminal justice field to prevent terrorist radicalization by effectively addressing the grievances and structural conditions in society that are conducive to terrorism” (Holmer & Shtuni 2017).

Regional context

According to available data and research regarding FTFs returnees and RRR programs done at national or regional level, in the Western Balkans, several common challenges and trends are evident that affect these societies. For example, there is a lack of proper risk assessment of the FTFs returnees and RRR programs that are in process of development or their implementation is still in preliminary phases in order to be assessed. Furthermore, the level of inclusion of FTFs prisoners in RRR programs is very low. There is a lack of resources and the specialized knowledge necessary for correctional officials, psychologists, social workers, and other stakeholders to successfully engage in RRR programmes. Although Western Balkans countries are slowly shifting from hard security and law enforcement responses towards more prevention-centred interventions, there is necessity for RRR efforts to evolve from a whole-of-government to a whole-of-society approach. Also, there is a lack of effective counter-narratives promotion and current institutional and policy responses put little practical focus on family members in the RRR process (Vlado Azinović & Muhamed Jusić 2015; Xharra & Gojani 2017; Azinović & Bećirević 2017).

Macedonian context

Regarding the Macedonian experience with development and implementation of RRR programs, it should be pointed out that even in the most important strategic documents³ it is acknowledged that the current system of resocialization is not giving satisfactory results. The rate of recidivism is very high and vulnerable categories of prisoners do not have appropriate treatment. The main institution for resocialization is the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions and the Sectors for Resocialization in the prisons. Lack of funding, lack of material and human resource as well as obsolete resocialization programmes are aspects that characterise the Macedonian penitentiary system.

Moreover, in the strategic documents relevant for this sector, some specific RRR programs or measures regarding FTF prisoners are not even mentioned. This only shows that there is no any systematic institutional approach for establishing effective RRR programs for FTF prisoners in the Macedonian prison system. Furthermore, in March 2018, the National Strategy of the North Macedonia for Countering Violent Extremism 2018-2022 was adopted by the Assembly, but it is noticeable that there is a lack of funding allocated for the implementation of the activities in the action plan. According to the Macedonian security services, the threat resulting from both the return of foreign fighters to North Macedonia and the problem of violent extremism more broadly continues to be high (Stojkovski & Kalajdziovski 2018; Selimi & Stojkovski 2016).

Family members

In the process of RRR program development, interviews with family and friends enables the authorities to build tailored responses (UNSC Resolutions 2178). In the Malta Principles for Reintegrating Returning FTFs and Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism, family members are acknowledged to be one of the most valuable sources for early detection information and key actors in developing and implementing programs to reintegrate returning FTFs. At a national level, just a few NGO led projects or analysis are noticeable in which the family members of FTFs returnees or radicalized individuals are targeted either as a valuable source of information, as beneficiaries or as partners in the efforts for building counter-narratives and de-radicalization approaches. In the focus of the efforts for developing effective national de-radicalization programs, action plans should also be setting measures which will “equip these families with the necessary alternative and counter-narratives and coping mechanisms on how to deal with the issue of having a radicalized family member” (Holmer & Shtuni 2017).

³ Such as: Strategy for Resocialization and Social Adaptation of Sentenced Persons (2010-2012); Probation Service Development Strategy in the Republic of Macedonia (2013-2016); National Strategy for the Development of the Penitentiary System (2015-2019 year).

Prisons

Valuable information on what kind of RRR programs are needed in the Macedonian prisons can be provided by the prison officers as persons who are in daily contact with FTFs returnees and who are able to monitor their behaviour. After many years of neglect and lack of interest by the state authorities, the penal institutions and the prison officers are one of the most underfunded parts of the state institutional apparatus in our country. In almost all reports related to the prison conditions and services which have been done in the last three decades (by various national and international actors such as Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment, US Department of State Reports on Human Rights Practices in Macedonia, National Ombudsman Office Annual reports, etc.), it is stated that the conditions are substandard and not in compliance with accepted international human rights standards. Furthermore, very often the conditions in the Macedonian prisons are assessed as acts of torture, other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Moreover, Macedonian National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT) has identified that prison radicalization is a growing challenge. Additionally, the Macedonian prison officers in general are facing with difficulties regarding the implementation of resocialization programmes. The FTF returnees from other hand are prison population that obviously need to be addressed in a specific way during the prison resocialization process. Therefore, the prison officers must possess high level of professionalism and to have possibility for continuous basic and specialized training which will help them in their daily duties and contacts with FTF prisoners better to detect and understand various reasons which might lead to further radicalization and violent extremism (RAN 2017).

Local authorities

Central and local authorities as directly responsible for the education, social services and local economic development cannot be circumvent or omitted in the process of effective RRR programs development. The OSCE emphasizes the importance of fostering "multi-stakeholder partnerships" involving community-based initiatives that engage civil society and local leaders (OSCE 2018). Also, the Council of Europe (CoE) Congress of Local and Regional Authorities in their guidelines for "Prevention of radicalization and manifestations of hate at grassroots level" calls the local and regional authorities of the CoE to design local multi-agency strategies in coordination with different levels of government, involving local partners and develop a plan of action mapping the local situation, setting up coordinating bodies and allocating the necessary resources to combat radicalization, and take concrete measures that can be followed up (CoE 2015:6).

Religious communities

Religious communities, including volunteers and imams, play an important role in supporting offenders after release. Lack of social and spiritual support can increase

vulnerability after release. Offenders can benefit from religious counselling or specially designed religious and theological interventions (RAN 2017:44). In the Macedonian context, clerics and Imams also can have important role in the process of resocialization and reintegration of FTF returnees and facilitators, but still there is lack of systematic approach in this domain.

Private sector

Employment together with social disadvantage, poor education, perceived injustice as well as the sense of shared identity with groups affected by perceived injustice present one of the most common “push” and “pull” factors quoted in numerous analyses as drivers that lead towards FTF recruitment (OSCE/ODIHR 2018). However, although “decades of research have found that correlations between structural development factors (such as high unemployment or low levels of education) and terrorism are at best unclear and often contraindicated” (Berger 2016), still in many research, analysis and RRR programs, employment is considered as one of the crucial factors which can contribute for disengagement and de-radicalization of the individuals. In this context many authors considered that “finding and maintaining a job is a critical dimension of successful prisoner re-entry” (Baer et al. 2016). Employment not only provides an individual with the necessary financial means to support simple human existence, it also provides a sense of identity and purpose, daily structure and routine, and an opportunity to expand one’s social network to include other productive members of society (Graffam et al. 2004).

According to the research conducted in the country, there are some indications that FTF returnees are facing stigmatization, due to “their employment in the private sector... private companies may refuse to employ these persons due to fears of having troubles with state authorities, since they believe that by employing a person that has a family member in Syria or Iraq they would become a potential target for the intelligence agencies who assume them to have ties to or support extremist groups too” (Holmer & Shtuni 2017).

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The seriousness of the phenomenon related to participation in foreign wars or paramilitary formations, as well as the consequences that these practices might have on the society and state security, inevitably imposed the need for an appropriate criminal-legal and timely security response by persecution authorities. The single response to prevent, sanction and counter it, is by employing activities and efforts that are mutually harmonized at the international level, and therefore global and regional cooperation is imposed as an imperative for success in this direction.⁴

International legal framework

The international legal framework addressing prevention and countering terrorism, as well as the documents covering the foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) phenomenon are of great importance for modelling the law on the national level. In this context, the most important documents originate from the United Nations Security Council, the Council of Europe and the European Union. The United Nations Security Council has adopted a number of resolutions to address the challenges of preventing terrorism and violent extremism. The most significant among them is Resolution 1373 (2001). However, the Resolution 2178 and the Resolution 2396 (2017) are of likewise importance. Resolution 1373 was adopted immediately after the September 11 attacks in the United States. With it, legally binding measures requiring member states to take a series of actions to counter, prevent and combat terrorism were adopted. One of the important aspects of this resolution is the introduction of the obligation to criminalize not only terrorist acts, but also preparatory acts, such as financing, planning or supporting terrorist acts. Resolution 2178 defines the term “foreign terrorist fighters” as “Individuals traveling to a country other than their country of residence or citizenship for the purposes of carrying out, planning, preparing, or participating in terrorist acts, or for the purpose of providing or receiving terrorist training, including in connection with armed conflict” (UNSC Resolution 2178:2). This resolution calls on member states to improve their criminal justice response to foreign terrorist fighters by introducing measures to detect, prevent and criminalize FTF travel. According to the resolution, these measures can be divided into three categories: criminal laws, sanctions and preventive measures.

Resolution 2396 addresses the risks of the FTF returning from conflict regions. The Resolution calls on member states to step up efforts to eradicate the threat posed by the return of FTFs and their family members through various border control measures, the establishment of appropriate criminal justice and information exchange. It emphasizes the need for cooperation and exchange of information between member states and relevant organizations such as INTERPOL, as well as to develop and implement a

⁴ The part of the analysis that sublimates the legal framework was done with the appreciated contribution of the Attorney at Law Filip Medarski

comprehensive risk assessment for the return and displacement of FTFs and their family members. Member states are expected to take appropriate action, including developing rehabilitation and reintegration strategies (UNSC Resolution 1373). Even though the need to punish all those involved in terrorist acts is emphasized, the resolution highlights the importance of helping women and children associated with foreign terrorist fighters who may have been victims of terrorism and to take these categories into account when preparing strategies for rehabilitation and reintegration. The Resolution requires the development and implementation of administrative measures to prevent and combat the travel of FTF, which includes the collection of biometric data, data analysis, data sharing of travel bookings with the competent state authorities (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime UNODC 2017).

Both the United Nations and the Council of Europe have developed key legal standards to prevent and combat acts of terrorism. The most important documents are the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism and its Additional Protocol. The Council of Europe Counter-Terrorism Committee (CDCT, formerly the Committee of Experts on Terrorism or CODEXTER) is a key coordinating body for the Council of Europe counter-terrorism activities. The primary objectives of this body are to monitor and ensure the successful implementation of the relevant legal instruments of the Council of Europe in the fight against terrorism, namely the Convention and the Additional Protocol. Following the September 2001 attacks in the United States, the Council of Europe set up a working group to review the anti-terrorism legislation, and as a result of its work, the Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism entered into force on 1 June 2007. This Convention does not define new terrorist acts and covers acts already regulated in existing anti-terrorism conventions. However, it defines new offenses that could lead to the crimes of terrorism already defined in these conventions. The new offenses are “public provocation for committing a crime of terrorism,” “recruitment for terrorism” and “training for terrorism” together with additional crimes where complicity in the execution of those acts is criminalized. In addition, attempts to commit the crime have been incriminated (Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism, No. 196, Art. 5-9). Significantly, the Convention states that the indictment does not imply a specific act of terrorism. This is explicitly stated in the Convention, which itself is based on an equivalent provision in the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism. The place where the crime was committed is also not significant for determining the execution of any of the offenses set forth in the Convention (UNODC 2017).

Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (2015) CEST no. 217 aims to address the criminal-legal aspects of the FTF and returnee phenomenon. The protocol, which was opened on October 22, 2015 and entered into force on July 1, 2017, requires signatory countries to incriminate acts such as participation in an association or group for terrorism, terrorist training, travel abroad for terrorism, and financing or organizing a trip for terrorist purposes (Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism, CETS No.217, Art. 2-6).

Regarding the European Union, although primary responsibility in the fight against terrorism and legislation is at the national level, i.e. it is regulated separately by all member states, a framework has been provided to facilitate the coordination of national policies, exchange of information and the establishment of good practices. Following the Madrid terrorist attack in March 2004, the European Union adopted a declaration (Declaration on Combating Terrorism, 7906) establishing the position of EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. In addition, the European Union has adopted important documents on the fight against terrorism and appropriate coordination, such as the EU counter-terrorism strategy, as well as the Framework Decision of the Council from 13 June 2002 to combating terrorism (2002/475/JHA) and the amending decision 2008/919/JHA. These decisions define specific terrorist offenses and establish rules for works edition for European Union Member States, as well as to instruct Member States to take action against them. The most important document adopted at the Union level is the Counter-Terrorism Directive (EU) 2017/541 which replaced the 2002 Framework Convention, and strengthened the EU's legal framework in this area. The directive criminalizes travel to, outside, or towards the EU for terrorist purposes, and provides a list of crimes that can be classified as "terrorist ones" (Directive (EU) 541 of the European Parliament and of the Council on Combating Terrorism and Replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and Amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA, Art. 3).

National legal framework

The domestic legal framework regarding the sanctioning of acts related to terrorism and the foreign terrorist fighters-returnees phenomenon is largely harmonized with the previously stated international documents related to this issue. Namely, the Republic of North Macedonia is a signatory and has ratified the most important documents of the Council of Europe related to the prevention and fight against terrorism, as it follows: European Convention for the Suppression of the Terrorism, the 2003 Protocol to the Convention and the European Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (adopted in 2005 and entered into force in 2007).

The legal provisions relating to the incrimination of acts of terrorism and the actions of the FTF are generally prescribed in the Criminal Code. The Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism should be mentioned as well as it regulates the measures, actions and procedures that entitle competent authorities and bodies to undertake them in order to detect and prevent money laundering, terrorist financing, and related criminal offenses.⁵ In addition, the Law on Execution of Sanctions regulates the resocialization of the convicted individuals, including returnees, in more detail.

⁵ This law is harmonized with the EU legislation Directive 2015/849 of the European Parliament and of the Council for the Prevention of the Use of the Financial System for the purposes of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing from 2015, amending the Regulation (EU) no. 648/2012 of the European Parliament and of the Council and to repeal Directive 2005/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and of Directive 2006/70/EC of the Commission.

The Criminal Code (CC) provides several articles distributed in several chapters that regulate illegal conduct that can be used to execute, incite, assist or finance acts of terrorism (*Criminal Code of N. Macedonia, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia"*). We mention only some of the articles of which the more important segments are closely related to the phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, and a more detailed review will be made of Article 322-a of the CC. Due to the complexity of the "terrorism" phenomenon, as well as in the criminal codes of many other countries, and at the same time following the example of several international conventions for countering and preventing terrorism, our criminal code does not provide a precise definition, but through a casuistic approach states the criminal-legal acts representing terrorism. Article 394-b in the Criminal Code is called "Terrorism" and states what actions are considered such a crime. Characteristics of all the actions listed in Article 394-b, paragraph 1 are considered terrorism as all of them include the element of violence aimed at people and property, but it also states the intention to endanger life and body and create a sense of insecurity and fear among citizens. In essence, these two elements are "constitutive features of the legal nature of the crime: *objective* - committing a heinous act against life or body, destruction of property, endangering the environment or other serious acts of violence or general danger; and *subjective* - the intention to endanger and create a sense of insecurity or fear in an indefinite circle of people" (Kambovski 2015).

Article 394-a further regulates the act of "terrorist organization" which represents a special incrimination of terrorism and implies the creation of a group, gang or other criminal organization to commit crimes that are characterized as terrorism. The purpose of such an organization is to commit serious crimes that are considered terrorism, i.e. include violence and create a sense of insecurity or fear among citizens. Article 394-c establishes the act of "financing terrorism", Article 313 refers to acts that pose a terrorist threat to the constitutional order and security, and Article 419 criminalizes the actions that according to the CC are considered as international terrorism.

In order to adequately respond to the strengthening of criminal law protection and national security during 2014, the parliament passed amendments to the Criminal Code that were closely correlated with the recommendations of several international documents, most notably UN Security Council Resolution 2170/0. With the legal changes, a new article was introduced - Article 322-a "Participation in foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolic formations", according to which anyone who "contrary to the law creates, organizes, recruits, transports, organizes transport, equips, trains or otherwise shall prepare a person or group for participation in a foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolic formations, organized groups or individually, outside the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, shall be punished by imprisonment of at least five years."

Paragraph 2 of this Article shall criminalize activities that directly or indirectly offer, provide, secure, seek, collect or conceal finances, funds, tangible assets or equipment which are fully or partially intended for the actions referred to in paragraph 1. These actions are essentially ancillary activities.

The participation or training of Macedonian citizens in such formations that are outside the territory of the country is envisaged as a special form of this crime and is punishable by at least 4 years in prison. However, if Macedonian citizens have the citizenship of the country in which military and police formations participate or if they are members of military, paramilitary or police forces but under the control of internationally recognized governments and organizations, then there is no illegality.

Article 322-a also sanctions the activities that are considered to be invoking and inciting such actions. Paragraph 4 stipulates that anyone who “contrary to the law of assembly through written text, audio visual recordings, social networks or any other form of communication calling, by spreading or placing in any other way available to the public, a message, recruiting or inciting another to commit acts shall be punishable by imprisonment of at least four years.” All those activities envisaged by the first four paragraphs of the article, if they are committed against a child, for which a prison sentence of at least 5 years is foreseen, shall be considered as a qualified form of this crime. Pursuant to paragraph 6 of Article 322-a, any person who conceals the perpetrator, or assists in preventing the discovery of the offense or the perpetrator by concealing the means by which the act was committed, the evidence or in any other way, shall be sanctioned with a prison sentence of one to five years. The possibility of effective remorse is envisaged, i.e. anyone who contributes to the detection of the perpetrators of such a crime can be released from punishment.

We can summarize that the essence of this crime consists of several execution acts: participation in foreign military and other formations, organizing recruitment, transportation, financing and other activities that enable such participation outside the territory of the country. The object of protection in this case is the overall security in the country – the issue of national security. From the amount of the foreseen prison sentences, it is also noticed that this is a serious type of crime, and with what amount the legislator is trying to influence the general prevention of committing such crimes.

The Law on Execution of Sanctions (LES) regulates the execution of sanctions imposed for criminal offenses and misdemeanours, which means the execution of imprisonment, which is actually part of the subject of interest of this analysis, more specifically in the cases of returnees and facilitators. Namely, the LES determines the basic principles for resocialization of prisoners, and from an organizational point of view, regulates and determines the organizational set-up of the Penitentiary-correctional and educational-correctional institutions in the country. Consequently, the LES is the legal framework within which all other strategic documents related to the national penitentiary system are modelled, and represents the basis of which bylaws and acts in the field of execution of sanctions are based, including the process of re-socialization in prison facilities. According to the provisions of the text of the law, the basic function of penitentiary and correctional institutions is the process of resocialization of convicts. According to Article 14, “The purpose of serving a prison sentence is to enable convicted individuals to engage in society with the best prospects for independent living. When serving a prison sentence, the psychophysical and moral integrity of the convicted individual must be protected, and

any form of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment must be prohibited.” The individuals against whom the sanctions are executed must be treated with respect to human personality and dignity, preservation of their physical and mental health, taking into account the achievement of the objectives of certain sanctions and measures (Art. 6). The convicted individuals, among other rights, are guaranteed the right to education and employment (Articles 164-175).

In addition, in order to exercise the right to treatment and the process of resocialization in the provisions of the LES, it is stated that convicted persons “have the right to treatment by participating in regular (general) and/or specific programs, measures and activities such as: work, education, leisure activities, sports and recreation of convicts, medical and psychological treatment for the convicted individuals (Art.169).” Pursuant to the LES, the work of the convicted individuals and children within the sectors for re-socialization in the penitentiary and correctional institutions, business and instruction departments can be organized (Art.128). In this way, it is possible to encourage the convicted individuals to behave well, to develop a sense of responsibility and interest and cooperation in the treatment carried out in the institution. If convicted individuals actively participate in the activities provided for them, cooperate with the prison services and are well behaved, then the law stipulates that these individuals may receive certain benefits (Art. 217-1). Furthermore, the LES stipulates that the level of gradation of these facilities is proportionate and determines the care for convicted individuals not only during the execution of the prison sentence but also after serving it. Thus, assistance is provided for the convicted individuals after their release from the penitentiary institution, which consists of “providing accommodation and food, providing treatment, advice on choosing a residence, i.e. staying, harmonizing family relations, finding employment, completing vocational training, providing financial assistance to cover the most necessary needs, as well as other forms of assistance and support” (Art. 258).

The central institution in the organization for the sanctions execution in our penitentiary system is the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions which is a competent body under the Ministry of Justice (Art. 26). The competencies of the Directorate include cooperation with institutions, associations and organizations dealing with the problems of execution of sanctions and detention, as well as cooperation with other state bodies, scientific and other institutions and associations to improve the conditions for the implementation of sanctions and assistance, after the dismissal of the convicted individuals.

FACTORS AND REASONS WHICH LEAD TOWARDS RADICALIZATION AND JOINING FTF GROUPS

Numerous studies indicate that there is no unified foreign returnee personality profile, or that such profiling should be considered with certain reservations. For the needs of this analysis, through a certain synthesis and comparison of the data obtained from the interviews with the convicted FTF-returnees and facilitators, their common general characteristics are determined, and their individual specifics and differences are pointed out in order to determine possible causes and factors for their radicalization and departure for foreign battlefields.

In order to better understand the factors and causes which lead to radicalization and joining Foreign Terrorist Fighter (FTF) groups, it should be noted that six of the interviewees were in Syria and participated in the armed conflict in the period 2013-2018, one individual was arrested on his way to Syria by Turkish authorities in 2015, while the remaining (three) were detained in the Republic of North Macedonia in 2015 and charged for recruitment and facilitating. Four individuals refused to participate in the interviews.

Most of the interviews with FTF - returnees and facilitators took place in an atmosphere of positive two-way communication, a sense of trust and cooperation, without special difficulties. The interviewees spoke in their mother tongue - Albanian language (only one person spoke in Macedonian) and mainly manifested clear and understandable verbal and nonverbal communication and had no difficulty expressing themselves. Almost all interviewees left the impression that they were taking care of their personal hygiene. The interviewees had good cognitive abilities and none of them presented any mental or emotional outbursts during the conversation.

Demographics

All interviewed individuals were men in their 20s or 30s and almost all lived in larger urban areas such as the cities of Skopje, Gostivar and Kichevo. Only one had moved from an urban to a rural area in his childhood. All persons who lived in Skopje, lived in parts of the city that are in close proximity to each other, which contributes to the probability that these individuals were in contact with each other, although they do not explicitly indicate that.⁶

Most of the interviewees lived in ethnically mixed areas, with only three living in mono-ethnic Albanian areas. In both cases, the interviewees pointed out that they did not have any problems in their neighbourhoods and they respected each other with their neighbours.

⁶ In this part two religious buildings are also located for which there is confirmed information that were preached ideas and views of radical character.

In terms of ethnicity, nine of the interviewees belong to the Albanian ethnic community, and one is a Macedonian Muslim. Regarding their religious belief, all identify themselves as followers of Islam.

Education and Social performance

Regarding the **educational profile** of this specific group of convicts, it is noticeable that most of them do not have a higher level of education, i.e. most have graduated from high school (six individuals), and three have only attained primary education. Only one of the interviewees has attained higher education (Faculty of Islamic Religion and Arabic, having studied in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt). All stated that they spoke Albanian and Macedonian, and half of them stated that they spoke Arabic as well. Furthermore, they all come from families whose parents have similar levels of education, i.e. the parents have attained primary or secondary education as their highest level of education.

According to the statements, all interviewees lived in permanent, multi-child, functional and moral families (or those which did not face criminal issues or endemic vices such as gambling or alcohol additions), had a normal childhood, and had good relations with their siblings. They also pointed out that during their childhood and youth they had no significant problems and that they had good and continuous friendships which exist to date. In addition, all of the interviewed family members of FTF - returnees and facilitators describe themselves as calm, sociable, non-problematic and non-confrontational in the past, committed to the faith, hardworking people who have tried to financially contribute to the family.

According to the gathered information from the convicted individuals, it is notable that they show good **social performance**, namely through good relations with their families and the environment, stable partnerships and friendships, and that they are generally satisfied with their childhood and life.

However, during the interviews, a small part of the interviewees mentioned certain events from their family life or events from their environment which if analysed more closely, indicate to a certain degree of trauma, which could potentially affect the psycho-social development during their childhood and adolescence. It is noticeable that the individuals do not mention such events in direct correlation with their activities for which they had been convicted. In this context, for example, two interviewees pointed out that as children they witnessed certain violent and unpleasant events in their community, such as demonstrations with casualties. In another case, the interviewee pointed out that during his childhood, his family moved to a neighbouring country where the economic situation of the family worsened significantly and the family faced existential issues. Later in his youth, the same person presented certain deviant manifestations such as problems with the law (petty theft), and drug addiction problems. He also stated that his greater devotion to religion helped him to overcome such problems. In two other cases, it has been observed that during early childhood, the persons had witnessed poor health of one

of their parents (in both cases their mothers) and one of the cases resulted with death, which was described by both as one of the saddest moments in their childhood.

Socio-economic factors

Regarding **socio-economic** characteristics, it is noticeable that all the interviewees stated that in their childhood, the father bore the greatest burden in providing income. The mother was employed in only a small part of the cases. Most of them grew up in families with a traditional division of family roles, i.e. patriarchal families where the father provided the family income and the mother was dedicated to the household and raised children.

It is noteworthy however, that one third of the convicted individuals was forced by their economic situation to work in order to contribute to the family's livelihood during their schooling.

In most of the cases, the families of the convicted persons were receiving or at some point in their lives received some kind of financial assistance such as welfare assistance, child allowance etc. Although this suggests that the interviewees came from families who had modest monthly income and were likely to face some existential and socio-economic difficulties, only one respondent explicitly stated that he lived in "*poverty*" while all others answered that their family's economic situation was "*normal*" or "*medium*". It is assumed that feelings of shame as well as avoiding potential stigmatization to some extent provoked such responses.

Almost all individuals were **employed** prior to departing for Syria or being arrested in the country. They were most often employed in retail, construction, auto-mechanics or as clerics. Only one of the interviewees stated that he was unemployed and "*would never work*." Most of the individuals stated that they were satisfied with the work they had, as well as that the salary they received prior to departing for Syria, was enough to meet their basic monthly needs.

Half of the individuals **were married and had children** before they left, or before they were imprisoned in the country. Two individuals got engaged or married during serving their prison sentences i.e. while on short leave from prison, while two others had been married in Syria, and in one of these cases, the spouse and child had lost their lives. The rest are not married and have no children.

Most of the convicted individuals lived in a shared home with their parents. As for whether the financial situation affected the decision to leave for Syria and Iraq, everyone indicated that "*not in the slightest*" did financial or other material motives and reasons influenced their decision to depart. However, despite such a categorical denial that they did it for some financial or other material benefit, the cross-referencing of the data on those who were in Syria, one can note that the individuals were stating that they lived well in Syria and had everything they needed, while having previously stated that they left with little

financial funds. All individuals who were in Syria, stated that they had their own house/ accommodation there. Based on this fact, it is possible that such motives existed, although the individuals do not explicitly indicate that material motives influenced their decision to depart for Syria or to assist other people to join.

Religion

The interviewed Islamic Religious Community (IRC) representatives denoted such economic-financial factors as motives, i.e. the poor economic situation in the country and the low material status of the individuals. They considered that those were the main motives why certain individuals from the country tended to radical and extreme groups.

Regarding **religion**, one can note that all convicted individuals were not as religious in youth as they are now, and some of them answered that they were not religious at all in the past. A common feature for all interviewed persons is that even though they all come from religious families, unlike other family members, their current way of practicing religion was *more conservative*. Additionally, all interviewed individuals stated that while growing up, besides their parents, faith and religious study had the greatest influence on their personal character today. According to the interviewed, faith helped them develop into better, more humane and moral characters, and in one case, the individual stated that Islam helped him to distance from drugs and alcohol. When asked about the reasons and goals for their departure, most answered that they did so in order to help Muslims in Syria, who were “*tortured and suffered*,” “*to live in a country where faith is practiced*” and in order to “*stop the persecution of Muslims*.” On the other hand, the interviewed representatives of the IRC deemed that the desire for self-realization, desire for justice, as well as the ignorance of religious principles and rules, were the motives for the departure of these individuals. According to the IRC representatives, certain individuals who were not part of the IRC’s structures and appeared as local so-called “preachers”⁷ of radical interpretations of Islamic religious principles videos showing religious themes and scenes of Muslim suffering in Iraq and Syria contributed certain individuals (primarily young people) accepting calls to help and go to “*holy struggle*.” The period when these individuals departed coincides exactly with the period of expansion of the Islamic State (Daesh) in Syria and Iraq, as well as with the fiercest escalation of fighting in the Syrian civil war: the period from 2013 to 2015. Only two of the respondents answered that due to study or humanitarian related activities, they had been in Syria a few years prior to the conflict began and escalated, suggesting that most of them had no true information about the military-political situation there. The interviewees stated that the main source of information in the period prior to their departure regarding the situation in Syria and Iraq was social media, various internet video channels, as well as their internet communication with people from other countries, including some from Syria. Nearly everyone confirmed that they trusted such sources of information and that prior their departure, they watched videos posted on various Internet

⁷ Representatives of the IRC also pointed out to specific locations, i.e. religious buildings (*the Yahya Pasha mosque in Chair and the Tutunsuz mosque in Gazi Baba*) where radical ideas and activities were preached and encouraged.

portals and social networks with religious themes or scenes with extreme violence from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, which in their content were essentially the same or similar to videos produced by the Islamic State (Daesh).

The interviewed family members confirmed this situation, mentioning that they noticed their relatives often watching such video content in the period prior to departing. They said that their loved ones *“watched the fighters online non-stop”* or *“watched videos on the internet... on Facebook”* with *“videos of Muslims being mistreated,”* “[because] *they were interested in the injustices committed against Muslims”* as well as that *“they wanted to show solidarity... to help Muslims”*.

The conversations with FTF- returnees and facilitators, as well as with their family members provided notice that FTF- returnees prior to the moment of their departure had overemphasized sensitivity to empathy and tolerance to certain events and situations, which in this case were the events with Muslims in Syria. Furthermore, some of the family members of FTF - returnees noticed that their loved ones, prior to departing, were in communication with (unknown to them) individuals, who they assumed, were from the country or abroad.

It is noticeable that among the convicted facilitators, although they do not deny that they watched such video content, they still relativized the impact of these videos on their behaviour and activities.

Besides the exposure to video content with radical motives and a sense of empathy for certain events, a sense of belonging to a group or environment where religious rules were interpreted and respected in a “real” way, could be taken as an additional factor towards radicalization, and in some cases for departing for Syria.

Although the families of the returnees and facilitators did not openly support their loved ones in their efforts to leave, recruit or assist, half of the respondents knew that they were motivated primarily by religious reasons, were preparing to leave for Syria or Iraq. All the families of the returnees were, without exception, in regular or intermittent communication with them while they were in Syria. There is one specific example when one of the individuals who was in Syria managed to convince his parents to go and live with him in a territory controlled by the Islamic State. This example illustrated how the person introduced his close ones to his radical views of religion. This case however, resulted in a family tragedy in which the father was killed in a drone attack while the mother was captured by Kurdish forces in Syria.

Significant feature of all interlocutors from the families was that although they had certain indications for a radicalization of their family members, they did not take or were not aware that they could and should have taken certain steps to dissuade and discourage them from adhering to such radical views and activities.

Criminal history

Regarding the **criminal history** of the interviewed individuals, according to the collected data, it can be concluded that most of the individuals did not have a pronounced criminal lifestyle and had not continuously committed other crimes. Additionally, they did not have pronounced criminal attitudes and views and none of them was currently addicted to certain drugs and medicines (only one person admitted that he used drugs in the past). However, among the interviewees there were three individuals who had been the subject of a police investigation previously or had been convicted of another crime (such as petty theft). Only in one case the interviewee openly stated that he liked the role of a criminal (interviews with prison officials revealed that this individual as minor had been disciplined with educational measures and he had been described as a conflicted and rebellious child, who easily succumbed to pressure and other people's influence). At the same time, only two of respondents had a relative from their family who had already been convicted. Thus, all the others came from families that did not have a criminal history. Half of the interviewees stated that they went to Syria on their own without the help and encouragement of another, while the others went in a group, with one or more acquaintances. From the aspect of their participation in some previous armed conflicts in the past, only one interviewee had such an experience, and only two persons served in the military.

MOTIVATIONS FOR DISENGAGEMENT AND DE-RADICALIZATION

Analogous to the motives for radicalization, the decision to depart or participate in recruitment and facilitating such activities as well as the **motives for disengagement and de-radicalization** are quite specific and require a thorough approach in their determination, systematization and transformation into effective rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration programs (RRR).

Four of the respondents were arrested on Syrian territory (by Syrian authorities / Kurdish armed forces / Turkish military forces). Three of these individuals had already planned to return home due to *"the changed conditions on the territory in which they were located,"* as well as the *"deteriorating living conditions,"* but they were meanwhile arrested. While one of them did not want to return at all (he is in prison in the Republic of North Macedonia only because he was extradited from a prison under Kurdish control in Syria, after intermediation by American authorities). Only that individual answered that he wanted to return to Syria, which unequivocally showed that he did not feel guilty or think he did something wrong. Also, it is evident that this individual wants to repeat the crime, meaning in this case the danger of recidivism is high.

Two of the convicted individuals managed to return to the country on their own, doing so by illegal means. According to their claims, the motive for their return was their family. Meanwhile, one person simply returned just because he was arrested on his way to Syria, and said he would not try to leave again.

The interviewed FTF- returnees and facilitators, answering questions directly **related to the motives for disengagement and de-radicalization did not provide specific answers**. One can note that the individuals did not want to discuss this issue.

Some convicted FTF - **returnees express remorse for their actions** and said that if they had the opportunity, they would change certain things from their past, such as the departure for Syria, going to prison, or would have continued their education.

On the other hand, the data obtained from prison officials from the resocialization departments showed that some of the individuals, who said they did not want to leave again, **did not show any motive for de-radicalization or change of behaviour during their imprisonment**. Namely, while serving of the prison sentence, the officials found it difficult to motivate their cooperation and communication (they refused to communicate with the female prison staff according to their certain religious beliefs), while they continued to practice specific features in physical appearance and clothing, and had never requested presence or meeting with an Imam/cleric, or representative of the IRC.

Prison officials from the resocialization sector indicated at a risk emanating from these individuals influencing the spread of radical ideas and attitudes amid other prisoners, even going so far as possible, recruitment in the name of their extreme ideas. Additionally, prison officials pointed out that there was a possibility that the convicted individuals would affect their younger siblings, or that there was a possibility of reproducing the idea of a soldier's life and respect for the martyrdom in younger family members. According to prison officials, there are no motives for de-radicalization of specific individuals, and the risks of recidivism after their release from prison are high.

Characteristic to the **individuals who had not been to Syria** at all (facilitators), and were convicted of recruiting and facilitating the departure for foreign military, paramilitary and parapolice forces, was that they categorically denied that they had done something that is illegal. For example, people stated that "*... they had never been involved in such activities*", "*... they did not convince anyone of anything*" or that "*... the case was fabricated*" and that they were only "*... victims of the regime*". These convicted individuals (facilitators) were not open to accepting their own mistakes, and in that, were not ready to change their own dysfunctional patterns of behaviour. This suggests that there is a tendency these individuals have a distorted perception of social reality and certain unrealistic expectations from engaging in illegal activities for which have been criminally sanctioned. Based on such views and on the current lifestyle (which is closely related to their way of practicing religion, which is obviously so extreme in certain segments that it is equated with the interpretation of religious norms in a way preached by the Islamic State, it can be concluded that there is a



*ROAD TO
RECOVER*



CHALLENGES TO THE
REHABILITATION,
RESOCIALIZATION AND
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CHALLENGES TO THE REHABILITATION, RESOCIALIZATION AND REINTEGRATION (RRR) PROCESS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Developing and establishing **FTF - returnee and Facilitator Rehabilitation, Resocialization and Reintegration programs (RRR programs)** is a process that is not simple at all. It needs to be well systematized (from a methodological, institutional and programmatic point of view), and sustainable (in financial and personnel terms), be flexible and inclusive, and have clearly set and measurable indicators of success. The need for comprehensiveness and specialty of RRR programs is initiated by the fact that each individual reacts differently to the activities and measures that are part of these programs due to their physical, psychological, intellectual and other socio-cultural characteristics and beliefs. The complexity of these programs is contributed by the fact that FTF - returnees and facilitators are part of the prison population with certain specifics (indoctrination with radical ideas and ideologies that have the potential to manifest and escalate into violent extremism and terrorism), making them a particularly high-risk prison population for the generally accepted democratic values, as well as the security of the society as a whole.

Modern RRR programs, in addition to the **transparent and inclusive** process of their creation, include **multidimensionality** in their practical implementation. They focus not only on the period of serving the prison sentence but, on the probation activities and period after serving the prescribed sentences as well, when the individuals are returned to their community.

It is evident from the collected data that our penitentiary system, and especially its segment referring to the action for resocialization of FTF - returnees and facilitators is in a phase that not only does not provide the desired results, but can contribute to further radicalization of these individuals, expansion of radicalization among the rest of the prison population and is endangering the overall security.

Until now there are 16 FTFs returnees that have served their prison sentence and basically had not been involved in any specifically developed RRR program for FTF returnees and facilitators. It is very important to note that, currently there are 13 FTFs and facilitators who are serving their prison sentence. According to the Court verdicts by the end of 2024 all of these persons are expected to serve their sentence in prison. Additionally, one more FTF returnee (not included in this research) is currently in detention in the Prison Skopje waiting for the court verdict.

From the perspective of the convicted individuals - returnees and facilitators

According to statements from the convicted individuals, **the penitentiaries have poor resocialization capacity**. Interviewees state that there are neither enough programs for

acquiring any professional skills and knowledge, nor for learning foreign languages in the penitentiaries. In addition, out of the seven interviewees accommodated in the Idrizovo Penitentiary, none of them participates in any kind of program that the prison organizes for the acquisition of certain vocational skills and knowledge. Apparently, this is because these persons do not have interest in the existing programmes. Only one of the two individuals accommodated in Shtip Penitentiary participated and received appropriate certificates for acquiring vocational skills and knowledge (welding course and cooking course). The individual in the Kumanovo penitentiary attended a course in the prison bakery.

All interviewed FTF- returnees and facilitators complained that the **prisons lack many activities of an educational (continuation of the formal education, language courses), vocational-educational (computer skills) and entertaining nature (more sport activities)**. However, some existential necessities were also listed, such as bad food and lack of warm water for showers. It is noticeable that all of them like and play football, so this should be considered in the development of the tailor made RRR programs as an activity through which these persons can be approached.

Regarding **psychological support** in the prisons, it is noticed that the convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators either **do not utilize it or do not have access to it**. From the interviewed prisoners located in the Idrizovo Penitentiary, only one confirmed that he talked to a psychologist only at the beginning of his institutionalization; while the others answered that there is no psychologist in the prison. The individual in the Kumanovo Penitentiary replied that there was no psychologist in the prison. In the Shtip penitentiary, only one of the two interviewed individuals occasionally talks to a psychologist, but only at the request of the psychologist.

FTF - returnees and facilitators use certain facilities in prisons. So, for example they are allowed to practice their religious freedoms, for example the ability to pray in a separate room. Furthermore, each of them is allowed to exercise the right to visit by close family members, and some of them (if they have good behaviour and served two-thirds of their sentenced) are allowed the right to a free weekend and home visits twice a month. According to the prison officials, until this moment, all FTF returnees and facilitators who have possibility to use free weekends, fully respected the prison's rules and procedures and there has not been a case when someone tried to escape.

According to the convicted individuals, the prison officials treat them correctly and do not apply different treatment compared to the rest of the prison population as they are housed mixed with all other inmates.

All FTF - returnees and facilitators have a positive attitude and emphasize that they feel hope for their life after imprisonment. The individuals state they will spend time with their family, wife and children, and lead a "normal life." All of them state that one of the first things they will do after being released from prison, is to apply for a job, most of who point out that they will try to find a job similar to the one they had in the past.

Moreover, they state they would work any job that would provide a decent living for them and their families. In addition, most individuals state that if they do not find employment, they would leave the country to seek a better life abroad (usually in European countries). Some of the individuals state that they want to continue their education. And regarding whether the community would condemn or accept them, most believe that they would have no problem being accepted, they would not even conceal the fact that they were in prison or the crime they were convicted for from their employers.

During the informal communication, convicted individuals who refused to be interviewed (four individuals) stated that injustice had been done against them and that they were unjustifiably imprisoned. Although the interviewers tried to explain the purpose of the interviews with them, they did not change their minds and even some of them were hostile towards the interviewers. Mainly the reasons for not participating in the interviews were the facts that they did not believe in the system, and as they said they did not want “to answer to the Internationals” (meaning of foreign countries experts or organizations). During informal conversations with the interviewees, it was clear they did not believe that someone is really interested in their condition and that this interview would somehow help them. Some of them stated that they already participated in these kinds of interviews and they did not see any benefit of that. Additionally, one of these individuals was accommodated in the prison’s medical department due to his medical problems which had been caused by sustained injuries in Syria.

From the Family Perspective

From the conversations with FTF - returnee and facilitator family members, it can be concluded that they are **not involved in any resocialization and reintegration activities** of this group of prisoners. All family members who were interviewed, openly and unequivocally confirmed that they would support efforts to reintegrate their loved ones who had been convicted. The interviewed FTF - returnee family members stated they had no material, moral or psychological support from any state institution, including social work centres and municipal authorities while their relatives were in Syria or while they were serving a prison sentence. They replied that they received neither help nor communication from the clergy or some civil society organizations, informal groups or counselling groups. Only in two cases did family members state that they had been contacted or that the police had tracked them in the period before their loved ones left or while they were in prison.

Most of the interviewed family members stated that their loved ones had changed while serving the prison sentence and they now saw their experiences more reasonably. Only one family member openly said that his brother felt remorse because he wanted to have family, but still believed the treatment of Muslims of Syria was a just cause. Regarding their own or the family’s safety, they all stated that they did not feel threatened by their loved ones after their return and/or release from prison. Asked whether the wider community would accept them or feel threatened by them, everyone, with the exception of one case,

answered affirmatively, meaning the immediate community without any problems or prejudices would accept them.

Employment, as well as the need for a larger or new home for their convicted loved ones, were listed as primary necessities by all interviewed FTFs - returnee and facilitator family members when asked about what assistance will they might need in the future in order to have a quality life.

From the perspective of the Islamic religious community - IRC

The IRC and local representatives of the religious community in the cities where the interviews were conducted indicated that **they had the will to help rehabilitate, resocialize and reintegrate convicts**. Officially, the IRC had a body that worked on preventing radicalisation and terrorism amongst believers. However, they did not explain in detail what kind of capacities the IRC had regarding this issue.

The interviewees pointed out that the clergy and the religious community would best contribute to this resocialization and reintegration process by organizing a series of lectures (*Khutbah*) and trainings on the correct interpretation of religious rules and beliefs, which would help overcome wrong indoctrination, moral and religious dilemmas amid these individuals. Furthermore, it is noted that such lectures and trainings could be organized while serving prison sentences as well as after the return of individuals to the community. However, all the interviewed IRC representatives confirmed that they **did not have personal contact with similar individuals**, they did not receive a request from them to perform religious lectures in prisons, nor had any kind of cooperation with the prison authorities on this topic. Some of the interviewees pointed out that there were only rare cases when concerned parents told them about such situations with one of their children, but those contacts were unofficial they were not officially referred to the IRC. Usually, the IRC, similarly to other endangered groups of believers, provided counselling and humanitarian assistance to the families of convicted individuals- returnees and facilitators.

For the IRC representatives, the most important activities that should be part of the resocialization and reintegration of the convicted - returnees and facilitators are **providing proper religious education, psychological support to overcome traumas, and employment** in order to fill their daily life with activities. All interlocutors believe that the process of resocialization and reintegration faces with many challenges and call for a more serious social approach from the state institutions, the IRC and the whole community to help these individuals reintegrate successfully, and to also ideologically marginalize the inspirers of such radical ideologies. The IRC holds that they could support on religious aspects of resocialization.

From the perspective of the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions

The Directorate is the institution that implements, organizes and supervises the execution of prison sentences, including the individuals convicted as foreign terrorist fighters or facilitators. According to the research conducted among the responsible individuals in the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions, **the FTF - returnees and facilitators in penitentiary institutions are considered a high-risk category of prisoners**, compared to other prisoners. They have been transferred to several penitentiaries of closed or semi-open type, where regardless FTF prisoners are in contact with other prisoners. FTF - returnees and facilitators receive no special treatment, or, in other words, are treated like all other prisoners. Pursuant to the Law on the Execution of Sanctions and the House Order of the Penitentiary Institution, FTF prisoners have the right to receive visit their family members – and do so regularly – along with visits to their lawyers.

Prisons, penitentiary-correctional facilities **do not have a specific experience in terms of rehabilitation and resocialization** of FTF - returnees, i.e. individuals who have participated in military operations. The rehabilitation and resocialization processes, similarly to all other prisoners, begin with the admission to the prison, or penitentiary-correctional facility, lasts for the entire period of serving the prison sentence and it is most intense (involving more concrete measures and attention to their realization) in the period before the release of the prisoner. Usually, all the prisoners are involved in various programs like trainings for their future in the labour market after serving their prison sentences. In addition, they are employed to work for the penitentiary as custodians and similar vocations such as for example cleaners or persons that help in maintenance of the overall hygiene in the institutions. The Law provides a possibility for employment of prisoners inside and outside the institution. But this only applies to those categories of prisoners who are subject to the so-called open treatment. So far, the only program was applied by UNDP and the Ministry of Education, whereas the **FTF prisoners have been involved in skill training and vocational training programs**. The FTF prisoners (seven of them) were part of the program for locksmiths and welders that was delivered from high school teachers in the cities where there is a Penitentiary Institution (such as Kumanovo).

FTF prisoners, in fact, like all other people serving prison sentences have access to organized health care within the penitentiary institutions. In the institutions, there is psychological help (some of the providers do have a specialization in psychiatry). However, the **psychological and psychiatric care** by professionals is available in some of the institutions. The psychiatrics are under the competence of the Ministry of Health and they are not permanently employed by the penitentiary institutions. The prisoners do have access to the psychiatric help if there is need for it, meaning occasionally the psychiatrics are visiting the institutions. The general conditions for residing in the Penitentiaries are not unified. The older prison facilities are in a far worse physical and material condition which is especially noticeable, and upgrades are currently underway. In general, the basic living needs of all prisoners are met.

Preparations for the de-radicalization of FTFs began in 2018, when after previous analysis, the **Strategy for Combating Terrorism and Violent Extremism was adopted**, along with an integrated action plan. Based on this operational document, **a tool for risk assessment of FTF and draft methodology for an individual treatment program for radicalized and convicted individuals** (hereinafter in the text - Program) was developed. The texts are not publicly accessible. In the next period, the documents are planned to be completed. The program is being developed with the support of the Office of the Council of Europe in Skopje and with the mediation of international experts. So far, it consists of four modules covering several groups of issues (the first one is for developing of relations and connections; second one is dedicated to narratives building; the third one is module of learning and the fourth one is dedicated to the values and believes). After the completion of the preparatory phase, by the end of 2020, the specific application of the guidelines from these documents will depend on the interest and good will of the convicted individuals to be involved in the de-radicalization process.

Due to the lack of a specific methodology for dealing with this issue, **other auxiliary activities are currently being undertaken**, for example - **a screening tool** has been created for convicted FTFs, and for those convicted for other crimes that show signs of radicalization. The screening tool is consisted of table of the systematic needs, narratives and networks and it consists of 20 indicators. The indicators are categorized in 3 categories (needs, narratives and motives). In this context, **A Handbook for Recognizing Signs of Radicalization in Prisons** (not publicly accessible) has also been developed. The purpose of the auxiliary tools is to primarily identify individuals prone to radicalization and ultimately to get them involved in the de-radicalization program which is set to be completed by the end of 2020. Additionally, to these interventions, on the basis of an internal approach, **multidisciplinary teams** have been established in the penitentiary institutions, whose task is to monitor the behaviour of the convict serving a prison sentence, i.e. - his discipline is continuously monitored, possible deviations / behavioural changes, the way of communicating with other convicts, whether it represents and propagates a certain ideology, and similar. The multidisciplinary teams include members of the prison police, the resocialization department and other sectors relevant to this issue, their main goal being to detect possible radicalization in penitentiary institutions, i.e. to observe the potential escalation between prisoners. The teams meet once a month (and more if necessary), and prepare monthly reports based on their assertions of the prison situation. However, despite all these activities, **there is still no comprehensive, detailed analysis at the level of all institutions, from which it could be seen whether the convicted FTF-returnees still represent violent or radical views.**

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that initial communication between prison officials and FTF prisoners has improved. The personnel in the penitentiary institutions especially emphasizes FTF - returnees and facilitators as a category of prisoners - the most difficult to work with, either due to inexperience, i.e. lack of initial knowledge about these prisoners, or due to fear of the nature of the crime they committed. After the first results of the work of the multidisciplinary teams, and after the basic information about the new issue, it

turned out that **the prison officials started communicate more openly with FTFs and the cooperation improved** (that opinion was not shared among the FTFs).

Hence, the information about initial, positive examples of individual, official communication relations with FTF prisoners would be desirable to serve as a basis for improving trust in inter-institutional communication. The responsibility for organizing work in this newly opened social field should be shared both on an international and national level. Actually, the success of the resocialization, reintegration and rehabilitation plans for FTF - returnees and facilitators depends exactly on the quality of that communication, established on a broader state level. The specific challenge is **to establish mutual trust**, and to do so, as shown by previous experience from practice, **to equip the institutions** (especially the departments of re-socialization, prison police and prison staff, where it lacks staff) is necessary, and additionally to **train the staff** for the implementation of the planned Program. Certainly, assistance will be needed to establish **cooperation with other institutions**. In that regard, the help of civil society organizations is welcomed. Regional experiences should also be used in addition to the efforts of the Council of Europe. There is a regional project for the Western Balkans (enhancing penitentiary capacities in addressing radicalisation in prisons in Western Balkan) to exchange good practices in which several neighbour states are involved (such as Serbia, Albanian, and Montenegro).

From the perspective of prison officials and expert service in prisons who are in direct contact with foreign fighters - returnees and facilitators

According to the prison officials and the expert service in the prisons who are in direct contact with FTF - returnees and facilitators, **the conditions in the prison facilities are generally good**; furthermore, the rooms of the prisoners are located in the new or renovated facilities and are excellent and well equipped. FTF - returnees and facilitators are housed in rooms, which are not separated from other prisoners, and all of them are provided with basic necessities (access to decent food, clean sanitary facilities, sport activities and facilities, time spent outside the cell). The safety, security and control in the four targeted prisons is assessed as good, however it is indicated that the Kumanovo penitentiary needs additional staff (security officers, psychologist, psychiatrist and other medical staff).

According to the prison officials **convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators are involved in various work engagements in or outside the prisons**, cultural, entertainment and sports activities, visiting vocational education courses, performing religious rites (prayer) and similar activities. This is actually in contrary to the claims of some of the convicted individuals who in several occasion denied that they are involved in any kind of activities in the prisons. However, these prisoners' claims cannot be considered as fully grounded because almost all of them used some benefits which are predetermined by some kind of work engagement during serving their prison sentence.

Regarding the possibility that the convicted individuals should attend vocational skill and knowledge trainings, the situation is different in the four targeted prisons. Thus, the Idrizovo penitentiary organizes a program in auto mechanics, the Shtip Penitentiary organizes locksmith and argon-welding trainings. The Kumanovo penitentiary organizes baker and argon-welding trainings, while the Prilep penitentiary does not provide such opportunities for the prisoners. Nevertheless, not all convicted individuals have shown interest for these programmes and trainings which is more noticeable amid the individuals located in the prison departments with highest level of security. There is no systematic approach in organizing programs neither for improvement of the formal education of the prisoners nor for improvement of the vocational skills. None of the penitentiaries organizes a foreign language course, even though the Shtip Penitentiary offered this possibility in the past. All four penitentiaries provide a separate room for religious ceremonies. However religious support from the outside is not provided, mainly because the individuals have not requested it though they are aware they may do so.

Regarding the rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration (RRR) process of convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators, certain indicators do not show encouraging results. For example, regarding the capacities of the personnel, the **deficit of qualified resocialization experts** is evident in all four penitentiaries. Therefore, in some of the Penitentiaries, despite the fact that the prescribed number of experts in prison departments with minimum level of security should be in ratio 1:30 of experts to prisoners, and 1:15 in the departments with highest level of security. Presently, there are examples where some prisons offer a proportion of 1:120 (Idrizovo penitentiary), 1:80 (Shtip penitentiary) in their resocialization sectors. Regardless, the Kumanovo penitentiary does not have an admission department⁸, meaning the new prisoners are denied an adequate process to ascertain their priorities and needs while serving their prison sentence, as well as the needs for their resocialization.

Regarding the methodological segment of the rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration process of these individuals, as mentioned previously, **several key documents are still being developed**. Thus, the prison officials stated they had yet not started the preparation process for “*an individual development plan for future interventions necessary for the reintegration of these individuals. Evaluation of the risk assessment for ascertaining whether the risk profile of these individuals changed* in most prisons was conducted only at the beginning in the admission department, rarely later.” According to prison officials’, **mechanisms to monitor the spread of radicalization** among the wider prison population within the penitentiaries by this category of convicted individuals, **do not exist** or exist only in multi-disciplinary teams in a pilot stage. At the same time, there are no prison manuals, guides, FTF - returnee and facilitators procedures in any prison facility, and there are no staff training modules that work directly with these individuals. The steps taken by the Directorate for Execution of Sanctions as well as the prison officials

⁸ Department where all prisoners are located the first 30 days of the service of their sentence for assessment of their personality and health situation.

regarding the preparation of an appropriate methodology for an individual program for treatment of radicalized convicted individuals, and the De-radicalization Program are positive. However, such processes should be more dynamic in order to save valuable time, for without such documents, there is essentially no systematic and analytical monitoring and data recordings related to the RRR process of convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators.

The fact that all interviewed prison officials confirm that communication with convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators is only superficial is concerning, furthermore the **individuals are quite closed when talking about their experiences and crimes** and that they mainly communicate with individuals who have been convicted of the same crime. Prison officials say it is particularly difficult to motivate these individuals to communicate and cooperate more closely due to the fact that prisons do not have a well-established merit system, i.e. a reward for good and active behaviour of prisoners. Therefore, for example, with or without work engagement, prisoners still have certain benefits as they are simply provided as such by law. Prison officials from all four prisons confirm that the individuals spend their time in prison in groups; they even have their own internal hierarchy and their own informal leader.

Although cell phones and internet access are banned in prisons, some phones have been found in possession of the individuals. Returnees and facilitators most often read literature which they obtain by themselves from the outside and it is in Arabic and religious in nature. According to explanations provided by prison staff, the content of this literature was not examined in detail because they did not know the language or did not know how to examine it. There is no partnership between the prison system and the IRC or other bodies which could provide input.

None of the prisons use the form of exemplary learning with former veterans in order to create better conditions for adaptation and trust building between prison staff and these individuals.

Regarding the existence of certain activities with the families of these individuals in the RRR efforts, all prison officials pointed out that such activities did not exist at the moment.

Cooperation with the municipalities (social services at the local level) as well as the Social Work Centres in preparation for the return of these individuals to the local community is minimal or non-existent.

Most prison officials who work directly with the individuals **assessed the risk of recidivism among the convicted returnees and facilitators as high.**

The greatest future challenges for the rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration of these individuals are **the establishment of effective de-radicalization and resocialization programs in the penitentiaries** because the existing ones do not provide

results. Furthermore, a greater degree of personalization of these programs is needed in accordance with the characteristics of each convicted individuals and the implementation of adequate training for the staff that will work with them.

From the perspective of the social protection system institutions (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and inter-municipal social work centres)

The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the inter-municipal social work centres - **do not have enough knowledge about the issue**. Opinions are divided, and the majority of professionals with many years of experience in the field of social protection believe that FTF returnees and facilitators pose a major risk to the wider community. Respondents - policy makers **do not agree on what the public policy should focus on** in dealing with violent terrorism, foreign fighters, their facilitators and their families. Some respondents - policy makers, believe that the focus should be on prevention of this social phenomenon, and the other half, on the other hand see the focus in assistance to those already convicted.

In general, the fact that the institutional views are not harmonized can be seen in the reality that **there is no specific program for rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration of FTF returnees and facilitators** at the national level. However, respondents from the primary, aforementioned competent institutions indicate that there are preparatory activities in this direction, although they do not offer specific steps and are far from a clear strategy for dealing with the issue. Therefore, **there are no special protocols for working with FTF - returnees and facilitators**. There is an action plan, as part of the national plan of the National Committee for Combating Radical Extremism and Terrorism which involves the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Social Work Centres, local self-government and the civil sector. However, that action plan has not been elaborated in detail. According to the action plan, the development of training modules, organization of trainings for social workers and professionals from other complementary institutions, and providing shelters for FTF returnees is planned for the next year.

The question - who should take responsibility to develop the strategy / program, is of peculiar interest. **The responsibility has not been institutionally recognized**, although all stakeholders consider that the strategy should be developed through shared responsibility. It is unequivocal that the MLSP creates policy. However thus far, the role the ministry has occupied in the specific situation is perceived only as coordinator, i.e. the stakeholders believe that the MLSP is only one link in the interdependent system. Municipal authorities, on the other hand, are aware of the location of the social specifics of the problem. They believe that the primary responsibility for creating and developing the strategy should be mainly on the central governmental level although it is clear that it will be implemented locally. In sum, no one knows who should carry the main responsibility. In any case, all stakeholders are **aware for the need for mutual collaboration**, the need for specific programs and that a more serious approach will be needed if the number of FTF - returnees in the country increases. Institutions clearly understand the need for a

resocialization and rehabilitation program for this category of individuals, **but opinions are divided on the question when should such a program be started.** According to some, both the program and the institutional support should start in the prison facilities, as well as continue to be implemented after serving the prison sentence. On the other hand, some voices suggest the resocialization in its true meaning, to be conducted after serving the prison sentence. According to them, resocialization means adapting a former prisoner to the new situation, i.e. after the experienced trauma. On one hand, providing a job that will provide the person with a basics for subsistence, and on the other one, educating the community, how to more effectively accept this category of individuals.

From the **activities that are being implemented thus far** (as previously mentioned, without a specific program for the issue being analysed), the competent institutions primarily point to the existing system of social protection. That is, after serving their prison sentence, the system obliges former prisoners (regardless of the crime committed) to report to the social work centres, and if necessary, be provided with material and professional assistance. The MLSP is creating policies in this area, and the social work centres are developing individual reintegration plans. This is the basis of the progress strategy for the individual at risk, who needs psycho-social support. According to the novelties in the Law on Social Protection, dealing with any risk includes the targeted work of a professional (social worker, psychologist, and pedagogue), appointed as a case leader, tasked with providing support. Additionally, in case of assessed risk and a lack of trust of the individuals towards the institutions, the social work centres include additional resources, such as health organizations, educational institutions. This approach is multisectoral, and each specific situation is monitored in the field. Only socially disadvantaged individuals are offered financial assistance and assistance in applying to the Employment Agency (EARNM). The possibility of securing, accepting and providing initial material assistance (if the person requests it), exists according to the Law on Social Protection, and refers to returnees from prison, regardless of the grounds on which they were imprisoned (according to employees of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, FTF returnees and facilitators are not legally categorized as a vulnerable group of citizens, but further consideration can be given to this issue, as well as material assistance, especially if it is determined that the motives for their departure to the battlefields were financial).

The potential of knowledge in this area gained through similar experiences, as well as the possibility **to adapt to existing programs**, social protection institutions consider them useful forms, and can specifically hire people who have participated in previous military conflicts, through properly adapted practice, and use the relevant work protocols. On the other hand, however, the employees in the Directorate for the Execution of Sanctions believe that this is not a realistic approach, and that a special methodology for working with FTF - returnees and facilitators must be developed. In any case, if the social work centres already provide support for the other vulnerable categories, namely protective, advisory, material, then it should be considered that such support can be adjusted for the needs of FTF - returnees.

Apart from the basic lack of a national strategy, specific programs and protocols for working with FTF – returnees are hampered by **the lack of capacity and resources**, reflected through the lack of necessary, appropriate personnel for prevention and resocialization of these individuals. As for the Republic of North Macedonia, the emergence of FTF - returnees and facilitators is a completely new issue, meaning no professional staff exists. Efforts can be made to properly train existing staff because they already have the basic professional potential. In other words, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of the social work centres and train the staff to deal with the indicated risk.

Additionally, **a lack of trust in the institutions** is indicated as an issue, something that must be upgraded with the mediation of non-governmental organizations. Naturally, a multidisciplinary approach is needed, complimented with a specifically targeted support. Regional experience and networking would be very useful for building capacity, and so far, **there is no regional sharing of good practices, at the level of competent institutions in the social protection system.**

In sum, despite all the existing challenges, shortcomings in access and refusing responsibility, the institutions of the social protection system are fully aware that **FTF - returnees and facilitators need to get involved in social life to avoid recidivism.** Therefore, many of the respondents find it crucial to determine the reason for their return to the country. It is necessary for the rehabilitation and resocialization process of FTF - returnees to include clinical psychologists and psychiatrists to make an anamnesis of their mental state. It is especially important not to leave these people on the margins of society, not to stigmatize or socially exclude them. In addition, it is necessary to provide them with material livelihood, work, and if necessary, housing. In this way, the danger of repeating the crime will be minimized, and the spread of the ideology of violence will be prevented.

From the perspective of the municipalities

Respondents in the municipal authorities **have no information about FTF - returnees** from conflict areas and their facilitators. Opinions differ as to whether they pose a risk at all. For **some of the respondents, FTF - returnees are not a risk**, while for others, the problem is serious. In that direction, in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, educational institutions, the Social Work Centre and the IRC, preventive work is being done to raise the awareness among the citizens. **There is no special treatment for possible FTF - returnees, no local targeted measures, nor local networks to support their families.** There are no projects attempting deterrence from recidivism. Some municipalities offer assistance programs, such as active employment measures, skills acquisition, assistance in establishing cooperation with the business sector, but these measures are general and apply to all categories of individuals. Hence, **programs and projects for the employment of vulnerable category individuals who have served a prison sentence do not exist.** There is cooperation with local companies, but usually a **fear and no will for their employment exist.** The greatest obstacles are discrimination, public condemnation, and the lack of appropriate work skills in FTF - returnees. Municipalities

do not have a communication strategy that would help with the eventual reintegration and return of FTF - returnee in the community. They only have preparatory consultations and cooperation with international organizations. On a national level, municipalities cooperate with each other, but also with non-governmental organizations in programs for creating strategies against terrorism, but in relation to this issue, they **are not involved in exchanging experiences and good practices** with municipalities from other countries.

According to the municipal authorities, the responsibility for working in this field should be in all social structures in order to provide adequate assistance and protection. Still, they believe that **greater coordination is needed on a central level** together with the provision of psychological and economic support to possible FTF - returnees. Therefore, **the municipal authorities do not feel directly affected in providing such assistance.** They believe that this is the task of the Ministry of Interior and the Social Work Centres and that the municipality does not have the authority to take the first steps and be the main bearer. That is, in the whole undertaking, the municipal authorities consider themselves only as an additional, accompanying segment, and they see the directions of the broad coordination as the responsibility of the institutions on the central level. However, it has been shown that the position of the municipal authorities regarding their own capacities has not been determined, even if there are specific programs for resocialization of FTF - returnees. Namely, the Municipality of Tetovo considers that it is ready to be involved in such a project, but the Municipality of Gostivar doubts that such a thing could be implemented without proper institutional support.

From the perspective of the business sector

Employment is one of the main factors in the successful reintegration of convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators in the community. When these individuals try to find employment, **beside the existing and common difficulties (individual barriers such as low level of education or skills and insufficient work experience) they may face stigmatization**, not only because they were in prison, but also because they were convicted for participating in military conflicts and activities related to radicalization, violent extremism and terrorism.

The companies that were part of this research **did not have enough information on the phenomenon of convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators**, nor about the RRR programs. Most of the 11 interviewed directors and managers of companies believe that **these individuals are not a problem in the municipality**, primarily because they have already served or will serve their sentence, they are not criminals, but only individuals who due to religious beliefs or because of naivety left in some conflict areas. This points to a clear need for wider education and outreach activities to distribute information on the topic.

All interviewees believe that the **openness of local companies to employ these individuals is very low** and that this is due to the fear of being associated with these

individuals and their ideology, and later to be themselves investigated by state authorities. According to the interviewees, these individuals will probably not be ready for employment after their stay in prison, and the **greatest obstacles are the consequences** (physical and mental) of staying in the conflict areas and the prison, **the stigmatization of the past, the lack of appropriate skills and abilities, the need for appropriate training, as well as the need for a certain period of time to adjust to work discipline**. Also, in terms of self-employment capacity, they believe that convicted FTF - returnees and facilitators do not have enough skills and finances.

Most of the business sector representatives believe that there is **not enough cooperation between state and municipal institutions regarding the employment** of these individuals and that it would be best to provide certain financial incentives and tax relief for companies in order to encourage employment of this group of individuals.

If one compares the data of the ethnicity of the interviewed business sector representatives, it can be determined that the ethnic Macedonians, unlike the representatives who are ethnic Albanians, express greater reservations about whether this group should be considered a special vulnerable category of citizens and whether they would employ such a convicted individual in their company.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As one of the more widely accepted approaches, the principle of a comprehensive **whole-of-society approach** to plan and implement the RRR process for FTF - returnees and facilitators in the Macedonian penitentiary system is still only at a level of an idea. Moreover, in a situation when the new National Strategy for Development of the Penitentiary System and the Deradicalization Program in Prisons are still in development, there is no indication when this approach would be operationally introduced. The late introduction of these documents and further delay in the implementation of the envisaged RRR activities can jeopardize the outcomes of the resocialization efforts regarding this specific group of prisoners. Furthermore, the efforts for introducing specialised RRR programs for this kind of prison population have to be done promptly due to the fact that many of these persons already served or will serve their prison sentence in near future.

The deficit of transparency and inclusiveness in policy, strategy and activity creation for the RRR of FTF - returnees and facilitators reflects on the model, applicability and sustainability (from a financial and personnel point of view) of the existing solutions.

Furthermore, there is obvious **incoordination amid state and local institutions** and the other stakeholders such as the families of FTF - returnees and facilitators. The business sector, religious communities, and civil society are not involved in the RRR process for this group of individuals. The data indicates that readiness in these “non-traditional”

stakeholders exists and they should be properly mobilized and included in the RRR process so that FTF returnees and facilitators could integrate and continue with their lives in the community more easily and quickly.

Therefore, based on the methodological approach and in order to contribute to the process, we give the following **recommendations for rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration**:

For Directorate for Execution of Sanctions, prison officials and expert service in prisons:

- ✓ The development process for RRR programs should be transparent, inclusive and based on partnership and sharing of knowledge and experiences between all relevant and interested actors in society (including ones from relevant government institutions, business sector, civil society organizations, municipalities, religious communities and other relevant local community actors);
- ✓ Systematic, sustainable, measurable and inclusive de-radicalization programs need to be developed as soon as possible which will provide appropriate counter-narratives for direct deconstruction, discrediting and demystification of violent radical and extremist messages;
- ✓ The implementation of RRR programs should be based on the “Whole-of-Society approach” applicable to policy-making to prevent and combat violent extremism and radicalisation leading to terrorism;
- ✓ Increase in the number of employees in the resocialization departments of the penitentiary institutions, and build of their capacities as well as establishing an admission unit in all penitentiaries which would facilitate an appropriate process to determine the priorities and needs of FTF returnees and facilitators while serving their prison sentences and their resocialization;
- ✓ Introduction of an individual and flexible approach to resocialization programs for all FTF returnees in prisons as well as provision of more courses to acquire skills and education, which are of interest to the prisoners, therefore, increasing their opportunities and competitiveness at the labour market;
- ✓ Increase in employment opportunities and access to quality education during and after the prison sentence is the most important measure that will contribute to the process of disengagement and reintegration of FTF in society;
- ✓ Preparation of the relevant risk assessment system for convicted individuals and thus enabled continuous detection of all changes in FTF returnees and facilitators in the rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration process;
- ✓ Establishment of a form of exemplary learning with former veterans in order to create improved conditions for adaptation and trust-building between prison staff and these individuals; and,
- ✓ Establishment of a sustainable individual system and psychological support program for FTF - returnees and facilitators.

For social protection system institutions (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and inter-municipal social work centres):

- ✓ Establishment of an effective social protection system and psychological support for the families of FTF returnees (both for those already convicted and for the families of those who are still on the battlefields, as well as for those who have lost loved ones on those battlefields);
- ✓ Development of a special program within the MLSP for subsidizing businesses for employment and / or self-employment of this category of individuals after serving the prison sentence;
- ✓ Development of a special program for subsidizing education and training within the Ministry of Education and Science with the support of the MLSP for this category of individuals;
- ✓ Development of a special program for subsidizing and supporting religious communities to assist in the reintegration processes exclusively for this category of individuals. Support should come from the MLSP, in cooperation with the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups.

For Municipalities:

- ✓ Development of sustainable and measurable programmes and actions plans for early detection of radicalisation among youth and other population;
- ✓ Development of communication strategy for informing the wider community about the FTF phenomenon and avoiding further stigmatization of FTF returnees and facilitators; and,
- ✓ Appointment of contact point/ or officer/s for cooperation with prisons, civil society organizations and families of FTF returnees and facilitators;

For Islamic Religious Community (IRC):

- ✓ Development of their own capacities for counter narrative of the radical and extremist propaganda among believers and especially youth;
- ✓ Establishment of effective channels of cooperation with prisons and other relevant institutions regarding RRR of FTF returnees and facilitators; and,
- ✓ Establishment of programmes and lectures for youth together with other religious communities about interreligious tolerance and interpretation of some religious aspects.

For Private sector:

- ✓ Professional business organisations such as Chambers of commerce to appoint Coordinators and to develop programmes and guides for good practices for involvement of the businesses in local and state preventive practices and initiatives for resocialization and reintegration of current and former prisoners including FTF returnees and facilitators;
- ✓ Development of a Campaign among businesses about the benefits of the involvement of the companies in this kind of society responsible activities and programmes.

We hope that foresight will be taken into account and this analysis will be the basis for further research and a comprehensive approach in order to obtain a positive outcome to which we all as a society strive.

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EXCERPTS FROM THE ANALYSIS REVIEWS

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“The authors have clearly demonstrated originality and creativity in this thoroughly researched and well-sourced document. While drawing from an impressive body of scholarly work on the foreign fighter the phenomenon, in general, and specifically on how it affected the North Macedonian local context, the authors have also developed an original methodology that included and skilfully utilized their own access to and research of primary sources. Namely, through 59 interviews with nine separate groups of interviewees, including the returning foreign fighters and facilitators. This, in turn, has resulted in the final document of remarkable credibility and relevance.

...The research argues for the multidisciplinary approach in addressing the underlying push and pull factors of radicalization in order to increase the prospects of a successful RRR process, that should include, but not remain limited to family members, prisons, local authorities, religious communities, and the private sector. However, the authors are concerned that a lack of initiative, devotion, and institutional interest in North Macedonia in addressing the abovementioned factors could undermine the overall RRR efforts. They strongly advocate that these efforts need to be carefully structured, sustainable, and multidimensional, but also transparent and inclusive. Consequently, they put forward a set of valuable recommendations for all key stakeholders.

The findings and recommendations are even more important in the face of a probable return of a few dozen men, women, and children from prisons and detention camps in Syria, back to their communities in North Macedonia.

... While this research develops a convincing theory of North Macedonia’s foreign fighters, there is no reason why this work could not be applied to foreign fighters in the Western Balkans 6, as patterns of radicalization and recruitment for the foreign fighting in Syria differed very little throughout the region.”

Margarita Tsatsa Nikolovska

International judge in the Constitutional Court of BiH, and
former judge in the European Court of Human Rights

“...The research gives overview and conclusions based on the interviews conducted directly with the target groups which make this analysis one of the first more detailed analysis in the country on the topic.



The analysis reveals a complex environment and consistently shows that there is no single FTF profile however it tries to summarize the possible push and pull factors and finds the main motives and triggers for radicalization.

... The approach taken by the authors provides the opportunity to examine the specifics of the phenomena in the country in a qualitative research framework that very well complements the literature review previously done on the topic.

The data presented in this analysis are based on well prepared interviews with several target groups which shows the comprehensive approach adopted by the researchers.

... Overall, this research gives a solid baseline for the policy makers and other relevant target groups to adequately address the issues regarding the current situation and establishing sustainable policies for de-radicalization, rehabilitation, resocialization, and reintegration of FTF returnees. Moreover, the research identifies the push and pulls factors in the Macedonian context which lead towards radicalization and joining FTFs groups by studying FTF returnees directly which can serve for creation of comprehensive preventive measures and strategies.”

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“... In that sense, the project Nexus Civil Concept is current and has a great social importance because it touches upon the security of the citizens not only in our state, but also beyond, in the region and in Europe.

... In fact, this is the first study in North Macedonia, which comprehensively analyses the factors that contributed to the radicalization of FTF. The research also set a scientific and practical objective, which it achieved successfully in the Report: to answer in what way, with what means and with the help of what state and social institutions, these people, FTF and their recruiters, who are serving their sentence, can be rehabilitated, re-socialized and reintegrated (RRR) in society; whether there are separate and country specific RRR programs and how they are applied; whether these programs are designed in such a way as to enable FTF a new beginning in life. It is assumed that their possible de-radicalization and social integration will increase the security in the state and in Europe.

... This is an innovative and socially relevant study, which has fully met the set objectives in accordance with the standards for analytical research study. As a reviewer, I recommend adoption of the Report “Enhancing the Understanding of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF): Challenges of rehabilitation, resocialization and reintegration of FTF Returnees in North Macedonia”. The first of its kind in our country, the report will serve as a basis for the policies based on knowledge and their implementation in regard to the FTF issue and security on general.”

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